

post Order of the Phoenix, pre-Half Blood Prince story.

Please consider this a replacement of the sixth book, since it was begun well before the release of the Half Blood Prince. I will not be changing this to accommodate the HBP plotline, since I feel that the Order of the Phoenix leaves a greater degree of flexibility for fan-fiction writers.

"Energy. It permeates every living and non-living thing. Without it, the world would cease to exist."

Vincent VonStolburg

Chapter 1 Lightning Strikes

Remus' eyes narrowed, peering through the thick onslaught as rain pelted the Earth. He continued walking, not breaking formation even as water sloshed about his mud-soaked ankles, chilling him to the bone.

Moving was becoming increasingly difficult and the thick wool of his cloak clung awkwardly to his icy skin. He wished he had possessed the foresight to don a lighter one, for moving certainly would have been easier.

But there had been little time to think on such details.

His eyes burned, the stinging sensation growing until painful tears streamed down his face, his salty tears mixing with the rain before they reached his lips, leaving the taste of salt water upon his tongue.

The stinging sensation grew worse. It happened whenever his rod cells multiplied, and right now the frenzy going on just behind his retinas was aiding him, bringing into stark focus the destruction of the night.

Cloaked images came to life, the moonless night no longer a factor as gray images danced before him with unearthly clarity. It was the one small gift his monthly burden afforded him.

Night vision.

His eyes turned from the world around him, flicking towards the blackened sky, noting the new moon. He had a couple weeks before the pain in his bones returned.

Tonks fell into step besides him, giving an involuntary shudder, and he caught her arm, helping her over another of the dead before she could trip. Her eyes were still bloodshot from the last time it had happened.

She nodded thanks and they continued their stealthy search. They dared not light their paths for fear of giving away their positions. Lingered Death Eaters could be anywhere.

She, unlike so many of the others, had volunteered for this. The others had been afraid, but he did not fault them.

A Reach had not been found for centuries. And the foul and loathsome Death Eaters would go to any lengths to find one. The evidence lay at their feet, and he was thankful that the deep darkness spared Tonks from seeing the full extent of tonight's destruction. Only he could bear witness to its full horror.

Five Muggles had been slain this night. Their torn and mangled bodies long since passed. There was nothing even the best of healers could do. All that was left was to pick through the carnage, hoping against hope that a soul had survived.

He picked up the pace. They had to complete their search before the ministry officials arrived. By then they were to be gone, mere ghosts to have passed through, unseen and unheard.

The past weeks had brought a slew of murders. No... Butcherings...

This was his seventh such search that month alone, and still the stench of charred cloth and burnt flesh reeled him.

Muggle families were being polluted with the foulness of Voldemort. And despite the Order's best efforts, they had been powerless to stop it.

"Six..." Tonks whispered, barely audible. Her slender form was bent down, her shaking hands checking for a pulse on a young man, his once golden-blond hair matted thickly with coagulated blood.

Remus bent down, grasping her around the waist as he helped her rise. In the heat of battle she was fiery, unaffected by the horrors of fallen comrades. He had seen her ability to block such things out firsthand in the Department of Mysteries. But now, in the aftermath of something she had no control over, the steely glint was gone from her eyes, her purposeful stride lost.

He pulled her forward, feeling her eyes linger upon the crushed skull of a man barely younger than herself. He could feel its effect on her as she quivered in his arms. He wished to spare her further torment, but they had to continue.

"Do you think when he is at the gates of Hell he will still believe it was worth it?" She whispered shakily.

He wound his arm tighter around her shoulders, squeezing her arm gently. No words of reassurance were forthcoming, but he felt her still, calming under his touch.

The sick bastard would pay. God did not let someone get away with such atrocities without retribution. And he would see to that.

The Dark Lord had a new strategy. Snape had informed the Order weeks ago, but even now he still found it unfathomable, for the vile being was no longer content to experiment with magic.

No... Now he was experimenting with magical creatures.

And people...

His plan was to harness the powers of every magical being for himself. So he could channel them into his one acrid being.

If the thought of an even stronger Dark Lord wasn't enough to frighten someone, Remus didn't know what was. But that fear did nothing to quell his barely contained fury.

It was common knowledge that when emotions ran high, witches and wizards often lost control. Hell, he had lost count of how many times Harry had done exactly that.

Only now the Death Eaters were using a Reach's emotions against them. The hooded figures had crept in the shade of night from home to home over the past weeks, killing each candidate's family right in front of them. Their aim was to elicit an emotional reaction, one strong enough to reveal the Reach's true potential.

It sickened him, how the Dark Lord could kill so many innocents, just to flush the Reach out of hiding.

But what was even more sickening was the Dark Lord's plans for the poor soul once they were found.

He was planning on utilizing their blood, granting him their power to kill. And the means through which this would be accomplished...

He could only hope that if there were a Reach, that they would find them first. Because while magical ability was now understood, a Reach was not.

Most witches and wizards developed magical ability at a young age. Though there were always the few destined to become Squibs, and there were always a few who developed it later on in life, in their teens. It had turned out that magical ability stemmed from a dominant gene, linked to the genes specifying blood type. And the genetic code Muggles possessed only differed by a few nucleotides, so it was easy for the mutation to arise randomly in Muggles, thus Muggleborns.

But a Reach was not a witch or wizard, they were not a Squib or a late blooming magician.

They were something different entirely.

When their magical prowess came to fruition, the same system that alerted the Headmaster to the presence of a new witch or wizard would go off.

Tonight that system had gone haywire. It had been slowly registering readings for the past five months.

Now it was going off again.

There was a person out there holding more power than they could properly wield.

And if Dumbledore was right, that meant there was a Reach out there who had finally struck out.

The poor bastard.

Instinctively his arm shot out, halting Tonks roughly in place, his dilated eyes roamed, scanning the ground of what had once been an ordinary home set far away from the major roads. Now broken floorboards littered the muddied ground, while smoke from the doused fires curled up in snake like tendrils, shrouding the world from view. Yet his eyes penetrated its veil, searching for the flicker of movement that had frozen him in place.

He clenched his fingers tighter around the familiar worn oak of his wand, bracing himself for whatever attack would come.

None came.

It was then that he heard it. A soft choking amidst the storm's howling winds.

He withdrew his arm, placing a finger carefully over Tonks' icy lips, signaling her to be silent. The only sign of her confusion was the light

crease of her brow. She would, of course, have no idea what he was looking for. Her hearing was not as refined as his.

But werewolf bites did things like that to a person.

It came again, a low, strangled moan, and he took off, rushing towards the source. No attacker could feign that kind of pain.

He skidded, flinging rocks in the air as he bent down beside her. The puddle she was feebly pushing herself out of was a deep black, filled with the blood of her and the lifeless man besides her. Her body spasmed with each choking hack as she coughed up inhaled water, her eyes glazed over from what he recognized as shock.

He pulled her up, speaking in low, reassuring tones as she flailed against him. She was too weak to do much damage, even of the other sort...

Tonks reached them, murmuring soothing words as she smoothed the girls mud caked hair away from her face, brown water emerging from her lips as another round of spasms racked her body violently.

He took her appearance in, another involuntary spasm shaking her. Torn shards of what had once been clothing hung lightly from her, and the debris and dust sticking to her wet face made her features impossible to discern.

He didn't know whether to praise the heavens or curse them as he and Tonks exchanged a meaningful glance. They had to get her back to headquarters before something worse happened. Her shoulder was in desperate need of suturing, and God only knew what else the bastards had done to her before leaving her for dead.

He let her cough up the rest of the water before stunning her. He hated doing it as he lifted her limp form from the ground, but only one thing could have survived this.

And as weak as she was, he wasn't eager to get on that thing's bad side. There was no sense in taking chances.

The rain poured down in cold torrents as Harry shouldered his broom, sprinting after Kingsley through the fast forming puddles of London's city streets. It was coming down in buckets now, and if he had thought flying through the torrential downpour had been bad it was nothing compared to the pounding of his feet on the slick pavement.

Moody's guttural growl sounded off to his right, not that he could see him, the rain was too thick to see much of anything. Thunder clapped, shaking him to the core, and the lightning flashed shockingly, illuminating the area to reveal Order members running in rank around him, splashing water as they went.

Five of them had shown up at the Dursleys barely an hour ago, reminding him of that night, barely a year ago, when an escort squad had shown up in the Dursley's kitchen to whisk him away to Grimmauld Place.

Only this night was different.

Promises of meeting with Tonks and Lupin in London were hissed quickly as Kingsley and Moody levitated his things, cramming them hastily into his trunk, and he had not missed how McGonagall's eyes had roamed the room guardedly. Even stern, steadfast McGonagall was frightened.

Tonight truly was different.

He blinked rapidly, trying vainly to extract the water cascading into his eyes, but it was to no avail. His glasses were too thickly coated with rain droplets, and he desperately racked his mind for the spell Hermione used to repel water. For his wand was out, and he could use it. The Ministry had removed the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry that summer. Dumbledore had headed up the motion, arguing that the return of Voldemort endangered witches and wizards of all ages, and that in the event of an attack, students should be free to defend themselves without the fear of repercussions.

The empty lot materialized between two run down houses, and he looked quickly at the small slip of sopping wet paper dripping from his hand, hesitant to ignore his surroundings for even a second when the foreboding fear of attack hung so thickly about him.

He read it silently before looking up. The run down magical home, in the midst of Muggle London, now stood revealed to him.

Grimmauld Place.

Lupin materialized at the top of the creaky wooden stairs looking worse for the wear. His normally threadbare clothing was now ragged and blood stained, his eyes hollow and sunken, holding the look of prey that knew its predator to be near.

Harry stepped through the doorway, stomping his feet on the shaggy carpet, slinging mud everywhere as the others piled in. He swallowed the lump in the base of his throat, pulling his eyes from the muddy floor, forcing himself to take in his surroundings. A man named Dorbert Cheeks could be heard triggering the complicated locking spell on the front door.

A loud boom reverberated through the house, shaking the walls as indistinct voices argued in the distance. Yet this did not bother him. Even his curiosity as to why he had been pulled so untimely from his bed could not best the despair that had hit him like a bludger. In the heat of the race they had ran he had forgotten one thing.

That they were taking him to Sirius's...

This house had never been joyful, but now it seemed a hollow shell of what could have been. It stood as a painful reminder of the scrapings of a life that he and his godfather could have salvaged. But that life was gone now.

War brought casualties, casualties brought pain, and pain brought emptiness.

That was how he had felt since that night. Empty. There was nothing that could fill the void. Not even the impending terror of facing

Voldemort in years to come could make him feel anything but despair again.

Mundungus cleared his throat, turning all heads towards him as he beckoned for everyone to quietly make their way to an adjoining room. He followed, his sopping wet clothes weighing him down with every step he took. But nothing could weigh him down as much as the memories... As much as the burden haunting him... The one they should have told him...

Realization hit him hard, like sudden submersion into the icy waters of the northern arctic, as he wondered what they were not telling him tonight.

He glanced towards Lupin who stood protectively next to him, opening his mouth to speak, to ask, but he let it flap shut. He remembered all too well that Dumbledore would not allow them to tell him anyway. They never told him anything when it could actually make a difference...

But even if they had told him, right then, it wouldn't have mattered. There was no way any of them could have known what would happen from that night's events. At least not yet... None of them were seeing past their need to get him to a safe location, so they could not have known that the night marked a turning point in his life, as well as in the life of the only survivor of Voldemort's first wave of attacks.

The war had begun.

Throbbing pain...Blood...Cries of pain...

"It's a miracle she survived..." "Ah...but was 'hat really a good thing Professor?"

Dim voices filtered into her thoughts, her sleep befuddled mind protesting strongly as it failed to comprehend a single word.

"...has a chance."

Flashes of light...flame... Coughing smoke...squeal of tires...Sean...

She awoke jarringly, her painful moan drowned out by the voices.

Voices that were oblivious to her awakening. Voices oblivious to the way her body recoiled in pain. Voices oblivious to how her eyes teared from the bright sunlight pouring in from the windows of the doomed room. Voices oblivious to how she clawed like a frightened animal at the thick comforter wrapped around her battered and bruised body.

Everything she loved was now gone. No explanation would be needed for her to understand what they had done.

What she had done...

A new despair hit her like a thousand hot knives, slicing her skin in a way the worst of the fired spells could not have.

She had done the unthinkable...

New waves of pain poured forth, her vision swimming dangerously with each pulsating pain her body dealt. She would have cried out, but the effort would have been too much for her frail form. Instead she drew in ragged breaths until her body gave out, the sound of a door creaking and a large, dark form standing over her vaguely registered before she once again slipped into merciful oblivion.

The dreams were always the same...

For nearly a month she had refused to succumb to the nightly torments. She was stronger than that. She would not lose herself to the world of nightmares, even if the books she had read on such things deemed that a more merciful fate than the one the wizarding world would bestow upon her.

But they did not yet know. Dumbledore had assured her of that. It had been nearly a month since she had come there. Nearly a month since Dumbledore had explained everything to her. Nearly a month since she had vowed to regain some semblance of a normal life. She wanted that more than anything, so bad she could taste it. But she would never be normal.

No...since the day she had regained consciousness she had discovered that she had been, and always would be, a freak. Hagrid had jokingly told her that she was a freak amongst freaks.

Thanks Hagrid... She thought bitterly, rolling in bed. She was in a hut not unlike Hagrid's own, just outside of the school. It was safer this way... At least for now.

She drew in a shallow breath, letting her sobs subside slowly before Hagrid could hear. She had dreamt about it again. About that night. Visions of blood and shrill screams had filled her mind's eye each night since as she dreamt about their deeds...

Her deeds...

She wiped the lingering tears that clung to her eyelashes, swallowing her own self-loathing. She would not fight it, for she deserved every bit of pain bestowed upon her. She would stew in it until it had permeated every fiber of her being. That much was the least of what she deserved.

But the others...They had not deserved it. They had been innocents caught up in something bigger than all of them.

And the ones who had started it all...

They deserved so much worse.

Everything good and pure in her life had been gone for weeks. It was with a cold clarity that she realized this. For now she lived for one purpose, and one purpose alone.

Revenge.

Harry lay on the top bunk staring at the ceiling, watching the way shadows played across it as light from passing car headlights shone in through the window. Ron's loud snores drifted up, breaking the silence like a bullhorn with every breath, and it was taking every inch of the willpower he possessed, to not lean over and smack his friend senseless with his pillow.

He sighed loudly, wondering when it was all going to end. Each day the Daily Prophet brought news of more killings, more unexplained disappearances, and of more war. For several weeks he and Ron had been catching tidbits of information, slip ups by the adults in Grimmauld Place, and right now it sounded like the Ministry was in absolute mayhem. Not that he minded that fact. Anything that made Fudge's job harder amused him immensely. What he did mind was the reason for the mayhem, and that was Voldemort.

Voldemort. It was odd really, how one person could be the cause of so much death and destruction. No one should have that much power, he thought bitterly, thinking of the toll that the Muggle deaths were taking on Mr. Weasley, Ron's father.

Mr. Weasley was the soul employee in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department, and recently, with the strain on resources in the Ministry, it had come to double as the Department of Muggle Relations. Now Mr. Weasley spent half his time performing memory charms on Muggle law enforcement, to cover up the deaths of Muggles who had been murdered by Death Eaters. Now every time Harry saw Mr. Weasley, all the man could talk about were different possible strategies for protecting the Muggle population.

Now if only a good strategy actually existed.

He rolled restlessly, spying Hedwig's gleaming eyes in the darkness. She hooted softly in acknowledgment, and he smiled in the dark despite his dark thoughts.

Memories plagued him every time he closed his eyes now. The Department of Mysteries... It was why he now lay awake.

He had willingly, foolishly, led them all into danger. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Neville...

Hermione had nearly been killed.

Sirius had...

He shoved the thought aside, re-vowing that it would never happen again.

The trick was in figuring out how.

To protect them, he had tried to blatantly push them away, but they had seen right through that. He had refused to write, and his self-induced isolation ended when both of them showed up at the Dursleys while his relatives were on holiday. The two of them set up residence there the entire week, Order members circling the premises like hawks for security, while his friends had infuriated him to no end. However, he had finally realized that they weren't going to go away. If he was going to distance himself he'd have to do it slowly.

Yes. A gradual drifting would be best.

It was with these thoughts in mind, that he drifted off into another night of fitful sleep. If only he could have known then what the next few years would bring.

Disclaimer: The characters, places, names, and events mentioned in this story, that coincide with the characters, places, names, and events mentioned in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, do not belong to me, but to that literary genius, JKR. Thank you so much for allowing so many of us to pursue writing through fanfiction JKR, we really appreciate it.

"One may never know how long their candle of life's wick is. What they can know, is how well it burns."

A.K. Lovell

Chapter 2 - First Impressions

Her eyes flickered over the lake's glassy surface, taking in the shimmering reflections of the early morning dawn. The sun was barely risen and the birds still slumbered, but this had become the norm for her over the past weeks. She simply no longer saw the use in sleeping when guilt plagued her even there.

A light breeze ruffled the water, tousling her hair gently in its wake. She casually brushed her wispy strands back, tucking them carelessly behind her ears.

Her hair had always been a source of frustration, always in the way, hanging in front of her eyes, driving her instructors crazy. No ponytail ever held for long, for her thick, glossy hair had a way of worming its way out. It was as if it preferred to be free and untethered.

Kind of like me...

She swore silently, the rippling waves now running across the lake the only witness to her frustration as she stood. If she was not back soon Hagrid would awake and find her gone. Of course here would be the first place he looked, but with as late as he always ran he would not be pleased with her absence, particularly when they had places to go that afternoon.

Diagon Alley. The very name evoked so many emotions. It was hard for even her to choke them down.

Not that she was allowed to show sadness. Emotions were no longer a privilege she had.

She had been warned of the dangers of such things.

Her bare feet crunched upon the dewy grass, but the early morning chill did not trouble her. She reached into her pocket, fingering the

cherry wooden surface of her wand before pulling it out, studying it appraisingly as she traversed her way across the grounds.

They were odd looking things really. Long and thin, and from the looks of it, easily breakable. She suppressed the sudden urge to do just that, knowing full well that nothing could be gleaned from such destructive measures.

It would not change anything, except her mood, but even that could not be improved measurably by the snapping of her symbolic hell.

Of course, seeing Hagrid's face when he found the snapped remains might be rather amusing. Especially with the huge deal he had made over how lucky she was, getting a specially made wand from Ollivander. It wasn't like she had wanted one, and the only reason the quirky man had fabricated it thus was because none of the real wands that he had brought to the school had so much as sparked.

So in what the odd man had called a stroke of inspiration, he had custom designed the one she now bore, forming the core with a lock of her own hair and a pinprick of her own blood. She couldn't even recall how many spells had to be woven into it.

It was funny, for her wand was the only thing she could cajole into working at least somewhat decently, and still she hated it.

Probably because it shares the same fate as you, she thought bitterly, glancing at the ever rising sun.

Jacob's ladders now streamed down from the clouds, forming pools of light on the vibrant grass, giving evidence to the warmth the day would bring.

It was a warmth that would never reach her.

A slightly stronger breeze bore the sound of approaching hooves, and she turned towards the Forbidden Forest, the outline of wings folding into a horse's skeletal body signaled Silverthorne's arrival.

Silverthorne would be pleased. Now he would not have to wait for her to change out of her nightly garments before getting his ferret fix for the day.

She stopped and waited, his gallop growing louder with his rapid approach, and a small smile graced her passive lips. Hagrid and Dumbledore had been as wonderful as they could be, but there was much they kept hidden from her. Intuition informed her of this with every fleeting look they exchanged around her.

Perhaps that knowledge could explain her hostility as of late. Hagrid was a good man and had not deserved the brunt of her anger the previous day. They had been arguing as of late. But then again, she deserved to be informed of everything regarding herself. Keeping her in the dark could only cause further harm. This she was convinced of.

Silverthorne let out a low, guttural grunt as he slowed to a canter, stopping to nuzzle her with his nose.

A creature of the dead. It was one of the more unseemly names Thestrals were referred to by, but it explained why she had felt an instant draw to them while the other animals screeched and howled in her presence.

His teeth glinted in the red hues of the morning and she smiled, pleased with the sight. It should have concerned her, but instinct again told her there was nothing to fear with him.

At least so long as he gets his morning snack, she reminded herself with some amusement, picturing how he would tear through the small creature's bones so eagerly.

She smiled again, letting the concerns of yesterday pass. She would apologize to Hagrid later before they reached Diagon Alley to get her 'school' supplies. She used the word fleetingly for while she was to attend Hogwarts, she was too far behind to be expected to actually turn in assignments with the rest of the sixth years. Instead she was to put up a worthy façade until she gained the knowledge that could help her.

Then there was the small factor of her being completely unable to incant in the first place.

No one would be the wiser to why she was really there. Dumbledore's concocted stories would not only check out, but they were even believable to an extent. He would back her if anyone questioned them. That was her only relief in this entire hell.

The hell that had become her life.

Kalliandra pulled herself onto Silverthorne and squeezed her bare heels around him, his bony ribs protruding into her skin in the process. He took off quickly, carrying them both towards Hagrid's hut at a pace unfathomable to any human, but not to them.

"I can't believe Fred and George, I mean they already got me one set of dress robes, they didn't need to do it again."

Harry laughed as he watched Ron squirm uncomfortably, the magical tape measure flying vertically around his friend's no longer gangly torso, magically recording the length of his arms, legs, height, and for some odd reason, the distance between his ears.

He knew exactly why Ron's brothers were getting him dress robes, but he wasn't about to share that piece of information. Not when he was actually enjoying himself for the first time in weeks.

"Well we didn't need them last year," He pointed out truthfully. "And we do this year. So maybe they just felt bad since your growth spurt rendered your other ones unwearable."

"Thank God for that," Ron grunted, slouching as the measure flew past his nose, only to be smacked atop the head since it no longer seemed to care about doing its job peacefully. In fact, if Harry hadn't known better, he would have thought it was offended.

"Blimey! Watch it!" Ron exclaimed, ducking another near hit, his feet entangling in the long dress robes trailing past his feet.

"Ron..." Harry warned, but it was too late. Ron had already tumbled over backwards, arms flailing as he took a rack of robes with him, plummeting tumultuously to the ground.

"Oww...bloody... irritable..."

Harry very nearly choked on thin air, quite a feat, had it not been for the loud peals of laughter he was trying to miserably suppress as he caught the rest of Ron's muttered profanities.

Of course, he thought lightly, his best mate might not be muttering the colorful metaphors if he could see the look on the sales clerk's face... Or the fact that she was storming over from where she had been attempting to size a first year for his Hogwarts robes, face alit, hands on hips, eyes narrowed vindictively at the mess Ron lay in.

Right then, with the impeccably bad timing that only Ron could master, his friend's red head emerged from the fray, a bright pink sheet wrapped around it like a shawl, and a sheepish expression on his face as he stammered apologies. The sight must have been too much for the clerk, because her mouth twitched, her serious expression faltered, and all pretense of anger vanished as she failed to be discreet about her own amusement.

"Oh heavens child!" She exclaimed in exasperation, clutching her side hard. "I dare say you might want to take that off before anyone else sees you in it!"

Ron stood up, disentangling himself from the various fabrics while Harry laughed.

"You know mate, I think Madam Maulkin's got it all wrong. I think that's an excellent look for you. Imagine what Hermione would think..."

Suddenly he was finding it impossible to discern Ron's ears from the rest of his tangled matt of hair.

"Oh shut it Harry!"

Harry grinned, enjoying his friends momentary discomfort. "Speaking of Hermione..." He said, calming down slightly. "She should be here any minute so perhaps you could ask her for her educated opinion..."

A bright pink satin blur flew across the room, and he caught it deftly, holding it out in front of him as he looked at it in mock appraisal. "Ron, I'm touched. But it's really not my color. You however looked absolutely spiffing in it."

"You sure bout that Harry? I'd be thinkin' that it'd be clashing with his red hair more than yers."

Now there's another welcome voice! He thought happily. Leaving the Durselys had been great, but he had sourly missed Hagrid.

It was possibly due to this, that he whorled around in his seat so fast that he nearly slid off, earning several loud snickers from a certain chuckling redhead tangled in fabric.

"Hagrid! When did you get here?" He asked, ignoring Ron's attempted reenactment. He took in his large friend standing awkwardly near the chairs.

They really should make stores more accessible for people his size... He thought, making a mental note to mention the idea to Hermione as Hagrid opened his large mouth.

"About five minutes ago Harry. And I stand by what I said." A mischievous grin formed under Hagrid's scruffy brown beard as his eyes landed on Ron. "Hot pink would be clashin' horribly with Ron's hair."

A loud tearing sound tore his attention back to Ron, and he stifled yet another laugh at the horrified expression on Ron's face. By all appearances, Ron had attempted to walk from the fitting platform to where he and Hagrid sat by the windows, only now Ron was staring

down at the ripped fabric hanging raggedly from the hem of his new dress robes.

"Now that's why you're supposed to stay put!" Madam Maulkin snipped, spying the new destruction and waving her wand. The fabric flipped up like a snake, a large needle zooming to mend it. Ron attempted to jump back away from it.

"It won't bite you know!" Madam Maulkin yelled, huffily storming over. "Prick maybe..."

Ron did not look relieved at the thought. Of course, the agonized expression might have been from how Madam Maulkin grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and yanked him back to the fitting platform, where she immediately began to fuss over the dire state of his robes.

"Better finish you first since you can't stand still." She quipped in her high pitched voice. "And to think that this morning I would have sworn it was the younger students who gave me the most problems..."

Ron shot him a pleading look to which he grinned bemusedly, chuckling at how Ron reacted to being fussed over. The guy could hardly tolerate his mother's own tending, let alone that of the seamstress!

Probably why he's still squirming come to think of it...

He turned back to Hagrid, leaving Ron to fend for himself. "So did one of your creatures get a hold of your teaching robes or did Fang do it?" He asked, grinning knowingly. Hagrid's creatures were always tearing his clothes, which would explain why half his garments were covered in mismatched patching.

Hagrid grinned and shook his head. "Nah Harry, for once me robes are fine. Right now I'm 'ere with Kalliandra gettin' her some robes of 'er own. Speakin' of 'er, can't wait for yer two to meet 'er. She's an absolute doll she is."

He nodded, curiosity driving him as he wondered who this Kalliandra character was. Must be a first year or really young. He was sure he would have remembered that name at least.

But in the back of his mind he felt a twinge of pity.

Generally there was only one reason for why Hagrid took anyone to get school supplies, and he was all too familiar with such things.

At least Hagrid will show them a good time, he mused, remembering his first trip to Diagon Alley. He opened his mouth to ask if they were from a wizarding or Muggle family, concluding that it must be a first year from the way Hagrid was still babbling on about them.

"Ah there ya are," Hagrid boomed, cutting him off at the pass.

He followed Hagrid's gaze towards the fitting rooms, taking in the relatively busy store when a not unfamiliar sensation hit him like a bludger, his stomach twisting oddly as his eyes landed on a slim figure, glancing around the store hesitantly.

And I thought Hermione looked good in dress robes, he thought, swallowing hard, berating himself for being distracted. But this girl was stunning, in an offbeat sort of way. While her features were rather plain, her long, golden dress robes clung loosely to her slender legs, with her delicate hands lifting the hem, revealing tanned ankles as she moved towards them.

The hell of it was, she wasn't stopping. Ron's grunt was the only thing that kept him from outright gaping as she came to stand right by him, biting her lip nervously, eyes directed at Hagrid.

"So you found some eh?" Hagrid asked, shooting Harry a wide grin, failing to notice that he had become a mute.

The girl nodded slowly, her eyes glancing at him appraisingly for a second before flickering away. "If you could call it finding..." She said, a hint of sarcasm mixed into her otherwise pleasant speaking voice. "It was more like being attacked with this..." She lifted the hem of the robe for emphasis.

"And my assistant did a fine job young lady. That color suits you," Madam Maulkin chimed out, shocking him back to his senses. He silently thanked her, and glanced over to see that she was still indeed, judging by his friend's pained expression, torturing Ron.

He shook his head whimsically at the sight, glancing back at the girl in front of him, thinking that Madam Maulkin had a point about the color suiting her. Her dark golden hair cascaded loosely past her shoulders, several shorter strands framing her face, lightly brushing her collar bone. All of it was barely discernable from the silky robe material clinging to her willowy figure.

Briefly he wondered if it were a blessing or a crime to allow girls out like that.

He pulled his gaze back to Hagrid, loath to be caught staring.

Fortunately Hagrid had not noticed, and the girl was too busy bickering with him.

Spying that his attention was again re-focused, Hagrid shot him a strained grin. "Ah well... Harry, Ron, this 'ere be Kalliandra. She'll be goin' to Hogwarts this fall to."

"Youffa meanuh uh transforra?" Ron's muffled voice called out from under the cotton sheath Maulkin was vigorously forcing over his head. "Weff neffa haf uh transsfuh befuh."

"What?" Hagrid and him immediately shot out, not understanding one word.

"You have a very...large...head..." Maulkin muttered with each subsequent yank, and Hagrid's guffaw of laughter drowned out Ron's indignant retort. Harry glanced back at Kalliandra to see her watching the spectacle, a hint of a smile tracing its way across her lips.

"I asked..." Ron's slightly aggravated voice called out clearly, "If she was a transfer, because we've never had one before."

Harry turned back to Kalliandra, to see the slight smile that had seconds ago graced her features vanish.

The look she now bore stirred something within him... But what? He could not put his finger on it, but he now found himself staring at the top of her head, for she had begun pointedly looking down at the floor.

Maybe she had found Ron's question offensive, though he couldn't imagine why. He shot Hagrid a quizzical look, hoping he'd clarify things since Kalliandra didn't seem about to do so.

"Yev're had transfers, jerst fer other Houses."

Harry frowned, "Then why did we never see them sorted?"

"Ye amph, wuff weff neevah seen 'em..." Ron grumbled, his robe once again muffling his words.

Hagrid eyed Ron with no small amount of amusement. "Well that'd be cause they came in the middle of the yer. Can't have 'em sorted at the sortin' when they've missed it already."

"Oof!" Ron grunted, extricating himself from the excess fabric. "So why the transfer? Did her parents move or something?"

"Yeah, somethin' like that," Hagrid said suspiciously, sounding rather similar to the way he had whenever he was keeping something from them.

Like a full grown giant in the woods...

Or a three headed dog...

Or a pet dragon...

Seeing a half giant squirm beneath one's gaze would normally be quite a funny occurrence, but it simply made Harry nervous as Hagrid continued shuffling his feet, mumbling about proper introductions, while the girl remained extremely quiet.

Harry feigned a polite smile, extending his hand to the girl at Hagrid's insistence. "Nice to meet you."

She hesitated for the briefest of seconds, before finally extending her hand as well.

"A pleasure..." She said quietly, her eyes flickering up to meet his.

It was a shock he had been ill prepared for, for her eyes held a trace of the familiar... So closely akin to the haunted look of Sirius' that he felt himself shaken to the core at the familiarity.

"Y-yes," He got out, releasing her warm hand quickly, chills shooting through him.

The polite smile she had shot him flickered and disappeared abruptly.

"Oh blimey!" Hagrid gasped hurriedly, startling him from his thoughts. "Kalliandra do ye mind if I leave ye 'ere with them for a minute? I won't be a tick. Just forgot to do somethin' but won't be long."

It was a wonder Hagrid had even asked, because he was already waving goodbye to all three of them, not waiting for a response. And from the malevolent glare that Kalliandra shot him, he really couldn't blame him.

"Like he gave me a choice?" She muttered, deflating, her eyes no longer holding the haunted quality of before. Maybe it had never been there. He really ought to have slept longer... With all his turbulent thought as of late running through his mind he simply wasn't thinking straight.

"It may have been important," He pointed out awkwardly.

"Yes, you're probably right..." She said faintly, her voice so soft he scarcely heard her, though her surprisingly gentle intonations did nothing to stop the harsh quality of her glare as her narrowed eyes followed Hagrid's retreating form. In fact, she was still shooting daggers out the door as the assistant yanked her over to the open fitting platform beside Ron seconds later.

Harry decided not to dwell on the look he had seen, the one so painfully familiar to Sirius. It had probably been his imagination, so he contented himself with trying to decide which of the two looked more disgruntled. Kalliandra kept shutting her eyes, as if frightened by the enchanted tape measure flicking around her head, while Ron kept shooting scowls at Madam Maulkin.

"You know we've never had a transfer before. At least not one that I can remember, right Harry?" Ron stated, glaring down at Maulkin as she marked his cuffs with chalk, determining the length of his sleeves.

He was about to agree when Kalliandra cut him off.

"Well you've obviously had one now."

The assistant flicked her wand, shortening Kalliandra's robes slightly. It was all Harry could do to avoid cursing the assistant. Girl's robes should get no shorter...

"You know that won't bite?"

Harry found that oddly comical, considering that Ron had been ducking the very thing himself, but at least his friend had not been standing chalk still like a deer in headlights.

Kalliandra had though.

She opened her eyes, arching an inquisitive eyebrow at Ron rather than answering him, and Harry noticed her visibly flinch as the flying tape measure zoomed close again.

Ron's brow furrowed slightly at her lack of responsiveness. "The tape measure...That's what I meant." He stated awkwardly, looking at her as if waiting for confirmation that she had indeed, heard him.

She just nodded, turning her head to look out the door. Ron shot him an annoyed, 'Can you believe this?' look.

He had to admit Ron had a point, she did not seem very personable, and did not seem too excited about talking, so he wasn't about to force her. Yet something about her aroused his curiosity. If only he could put his finger upon it...

Several minutes passed, the awkward silence broken only by Ron's random outbursts of displeasure, and Kalliandra's quiet responses to the assistant's questions. Unsurprisingly she was the first one done, and he found himself having a hard time not staring at her now that the dress robes were completely fitted around her form. The thing was classy, elegant, and practically form fitting.

"Hey how come she got done so quick?" Ron asked indignantly, as Kalliandra made her way back to the changing rooms, the bottom of her dress robe gathered in her hands as she walked carefully. She seemed unused to walking in something of the sort.

"Because she, unlike some of my customers, actually held still while we measured her," Madam Maulkin quipped from where she knelt on the floor, using her wand to make minor adjustments to the hem of Ron's robe.

She flashed Harry an inconspicuous wink, and he barely caught it, smiling slightly at her before glancing back to see Kalliandra disappear behind a changing room curtain. He couldn't help but feel slightly relieved. Between his curiosity about this girl and Ron's glares, he did not want to be caught staring at her. And he knew he'd be a lot less prone to doing that once she was out of that damnable robe.

Of course he was wrong, because when she re-emerged he found the short sleeved top she wore to be no better than the low cut lines the robe had bore.

"Ahem."

He tore his eyes away from where she stood by the counter, to see a disapproving Ron shaking his head firmly. He appeared to be mouthing, 'No' at him.

Come to think of it, Ron seemed to be making disgusted faces as well.

Harry failed to have the chance to so much as shrug in response to Ron's repulsive like gestures in the girl's direction, before a quiet clatter broke the relative silence of the room. He turned to see Kalliandra squatting down on the floor, picking up tiny pins in her hands.

The bemused assistant stood behind the counter, bearing a slight smile. "Oh honey, thank you, but don't worry about that. I'm as clumsy as can be..." The assistant flicked her wand and the little pins scattered all over the place disappeared, reappearing into the pin cushion held in Kalliandra's hand.

"See, I'm knocking stuff over all the time," The assistant continued, while the girl stared at the now filled pin cushion, biting her lower lip, confusion etched into each of her features.

He didn't fail to notice it.

It's like she's never seen magic before...

There was no time to follow that absurd train of thought, for Kalliandra had already stood, thanked the woman, and disappeared out the front entrance with her bag.

"Wasn't she supposed to wait for Hagrid?" Ron asked after a moment's pause, brow wrinkled confusedly.

Ron was right, she was supposed to wait for Hagrid. Harry hesitated a moment, an internal debate waging until curiosity got the better of him. Wasting no more time he jumped from his seat and went after her.

He wanted to see where she was going.

"And after all, what is a lie? 'Tis but a the truth in masquerade."
George Gordon Noel Byron, Lord Byron

Chapter 3 Entangled Webs

Traversing her way through the swarming, cobblestone streets of Diagon Alley, she let out an unsteady breath.

To the core she had been undeniably, inexplicably, shaken. And all because of a scattered pile of pins upon the flooring of a garment shop, and her own miserable attempts to rectify a clerk's clumsiness.

Magic.

Yet again it had been unceremoniously thrown in her face, for wizards and witches had it at their disposal.

The sooner she became accustomed the better.

She could not afford to be seen or discovered for what she really was, for in all her incompetence in the craft that made this veiled world of sorcery flourish, she would be left naked and exposed, the consequences of what had lain both within and far flung from her grasps unthinkable.

Butchered for who she was... The possibility was nothing less than she deserved, for one such as herself should not be allowed to walk upon the bustling streets, the feel of the most luminescent of the heavens' orbs warming her skin, the light clatter of pebbles being kicked askew and the laughter of children ringing within the recesses of her auditory senses.

No. There were others who deserved such privilege far more than she, though they now lay where the sun could no longer reach their frigid souls. And with them, lay the semblance of who she had once been.

She had died the same day they had succumbed, despite the rhythmic pounding within her chest.

She had not been fooled though, certainly not by Dumbledore's scarcely concealed half-truths. She knew the pulsating rhythm within her to be fleeting, it was simply the reasons for this that she was unaware.

She was going to find out.

It was why she had left, fleeing in hopes of traversing her way through the densely packed streets, making her way towards the looming marble building, the golden words Gringotts Bank emblazoned across its ivory surface.

After barely a hundred paces the pillar of the wizarding commercial society emerged over the heads of the crowd. Its supporting columns leaning in various directions, their haphazard support for the upper levels of the edifice strengthened with the sorcery filling the streets.

Though it was not there that she wished to go.

It was there, directly across from the goblin filled depository. That was where she desired to go to seek out her answers. Turning down the dark alley she noted a rickety sign suspended above it's entryway bearing the jaggedly carved words Knockturn Alley.

Yes, she had been forewarned of its shady characteristics. She had carefully listened to Hagrid's babbling about it, about how he hated to venture down it each time he found himself in need of Flesh Eating Slug Repellant, and about how objects of the illicit variety could be procured.

She was an object of the illicit variety, and if there was anywhere to find acceptance within the society that demanded swift execution for those of her nature, it would be here.

Hagrid had been none the wiser, content to answer her every question about the dingy alleyway. He had even inadvertently supplied her with the name of the man to whom she wished to speak, Mr. Borgin.

Kalliandra had a plan, and it would soon be set in motion.

"You know Kingsley loosening up could do you wonders. I mean really, when was the last time you took an honest vacation?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt let out an incensed huff, raucously shoving his way through the thick crowd grunting about insubordination. Tonks only recourse was to roll her eyes, further darkening the reddened hue that her boss' face was beginning to take on.

"Nymp-ha-dora," Kingsley grunted, sounding strained. "If you ever..."

"Kingsley, Harry is perfectly capable of taking care of himself for more than five minutes," She said amicably. "And besides, how was I supposed to pick up Remus' birthday gift for hi.."

"Tonks..."

Casting a sidelong glance at the senior Order member she came to a halt in the center of traffic, ignoring the protestations of the witches and wizards around them, who were now being forced to walk a full two feet to the side to avoid them. For all their complaining one would think she was inciting a riot, not stopping for a chat with her slightly formidable boss.

Speaking of Kingsley, he looked like he was either suppressing the desire to throttle her, or in the beginning stages of cardiac arrest.

Frowning she regarded him concernedly. "Are you familiar with hypertension Kingsley?"

A large vein was beginning to pulse in the man's forehead, and he leaned low. "Damn't Tonks!" He hissed. "This is not a game!"

She nodded, squinting up at the taller figure in the bright sunlight. "A fact I'm well aware of," She said pointedly, her previous pretenses of humor vanishing. "But the Order is constantly hovering over Harry, convinced that he is an incompetent 16 year old. Yet I have never heard of a 16 year old who has survived as mu..."

A rather large hand clamped over her mouth, and she found herself being roughly drug away from the cobblestone streets into a back alley, away from the ears of passersby.

"Tonks you should know better than to..."

"Than to what?" She shot back in frustration. "Than to discuss what Harry has been through in the open?"

She did not even wait for his nod of affirmation before continuing on her tirade. "Why should we be silent Kingsley? Lord knows these ignorant people need a wake up call, not that the Ministry is giving them one with their censorship of the papers and..."

With an audible crinkling Kingsley shoved a copy of the Daily Prophet into her hands, watching her closely as she unfolded it, discovering it to be the latest issue that she had not yet read.

Twenty Seven Muggles Die Mysteriously in the Spanse of a Fortnight. Is He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named responsible?

Her mouth fell open, forming a small 'O' of understanding.

"That's right," Kingsley stated for her. "They are finally reporting the facts. Fudge can't censor them any longer, not with all the eyewitness accounts of the Ministry employees from..."

"That night," She whispered, knowing full well to what he referred. The scar tissue across her chest would forever serve as a striking reminder to her carelessness in dueling with her aunt. It had taken half of the summer, laid up in St. Mungos, for her to make a full recovery from the blows she had been dealt.

Remus had been her only source of sanity during that time, as he had been on the night they had combed through the grotesquely charred yard of an isolated Muggle home, searching for survivors.

The month old picture of that terrible scene was now burned beneath the front page's blinking headlines, the water pooling upon the pavement darkened with what she knew to be blood.

The poor souls had never had a chance.

Clenching the tabloid between her hands she met her boss' gaze. "Look," She whispered, forcing her voice calm. "I know the Order is concerned about Harry. But he has proven more than competent in situations that most Aurors have yet to face, and he's come out alive an..."

"And in the process put half the Order in grievous danger!" Kingsley boomed angrily. "All due to his impulsive, brash, ill-thought..."

"Actions," She supplied, ignoring how his eye twitched. "But how does the Order expect him to learn to make decisions if we are always hovering over him?"

His eyes widened considerably, "In war there is no room for mistakes."

"Who said he was making them?"

Kingsley began pacing up and down the Apothecary's side alley. "No one, but you have to admit the child is..."

"Teenager," She corrected. "And after what he has experienced one can hardly call him even that."

"Is it possible," He said through gritted teeth. "For you to not interrupt me?"

"I'll take it under consideration," She replied, leaning against the dirty brick wall, content to bask in its shade for a moment of respite from the August heat.

Kingsley's next tirade was unintelligible, though she did catch the words 'irresponsibility', 'insubordinate', and 'damn't girl'.

Slowly she began banging her head against the brick siding.

"...and it was your job to watch over them today. But when I come to check on things what do I find? You! Alone! In the Quidditch shop purchasing some ridiculously pointless Snitch..."

"It is not just a Snitch!" She interjected, halting the assault on her skull. "It's a collector's edition! And Remus ordered it a month ago for Harry, special order! They had to make it to Remus' exact specifications, and we thought it would be a nice surprise to pick it up while out toda..."

"Oh grand!" Kingsley burst out, throwing his hands up. "Perhaps you explain your reasoning to the Order when Death Eaters attack and take them away!"

She groaned, resuming the thumping of her head. "Kingsley the Order would do well to realize that Harry is nearly of age. He's nearly an adult and nothing is going to happen while he and Ron are being fitted for robes."

Kingsley stopped pacing abruptly, "And what of the girl?"

"You mean Ginny?"

The man let out a sound oddly reminiscent of a hippogriff in heat, stomping the ground and sending a slew of dust scattering into the air. "Who do you think I mean? What other girl were you to chaperone today! Focus for just a second would you Nympha..."

"We ran into her boyfriend," Tonks hastened to inform, unwilling to hear that cursed name again. "So she is spending the rest of the afternoon with the Finnigans."

"And the boys?"

She smirked, "Being fawned over by Madame Maulkin."

Despite his fury Kingsley gave an involuntary shudder. It was a well known fact in his department that he hated all things related to formal

attire, with a particular aversion to those who made such things their profession.

Tonks smile only widened further, her pupils narrowing into small ovular slits, eyes yellowing like a cats. "See Kingsley? They're perfectly safe. No self-respecting Death Eater would venture into there."

Kingsley just groaned, "Tonks because of you I am considering early retirement. Only I can't because as much as I hate to admit it, after me you have seen the most 'action' in the department and would be my successor."

Tonks jaw dropped at the admission, a bellowing laugh resonating from Shacklebolt's large form.

"Speechless are we? Well hell has indeed frozen over, either that or your nose of the day prevents proper breathing."

Her hand flew to her crooked nose, pondering what was wrong with it. She had spied a copy of Witch Weekly earlier that day, and while she was not one for fashion she had seen this weeks headline: Crooked Nose Curses, In or Out of Season?

Naturally she had spent the morning wandering around, telling anyone within earshot that Rita Skeeter had cursed her, just to see the mingled reactions.

The boys had at least found it entertaining.

Kingsley's loud cough drew her attention back, where he had adopted a rather exasperated glare.

"You do see my dilemma don't you?"

Eyeing his nose she nodded. "Yup, you've got a crooked nose too. I hear those Muggle nutters have some great techniques for remedying tho..."

Kingsley stomped his foot again. "See? This is exactly what I mean! Your attention span is bordering on the non-existent and you're always usurping authority in favor of whatever your whim of the moment is! In this case it's the, 'the kids can take care of themselves' whim! That's precisely why I can't retire early! You're nowhere near ready for such a position and there is no one else with enough combat experience to recommend!"

She grimaced as his tones went unusually high for a man of his girth.

"Are you even listening?"

"Yes Boss."

"Don't call me that."

"Your Supremacy?"

Kingsley's eye twitched. "Don't..."

"I'm just taking your advice. I thought authority figures liked to be addressed..."

"One more word and a 'Nympadora' sign is going to wind up with a permanent sticking charm on your front door."

She sobered immediately.

"And stop banging your head."

She stopped that to.

"And don't squirm."

Suppressing a groan she resisted the temptation, her discomfort level rising exponentially. Movement was the only thing sufficient for quelling her often frazzled nerves in Shacklebolt's presence. He knew this, and was intentionally depriving her of it.

Good God, if he was this bad with her she would hate to be a suspect for some abhorrent crime. No wonder they normally came out of questioning twitching.

Contenting herself with incrementally elongating and shortening her nails, the process concealed by the woven bag her fingers were curled around, she arched a questioning eyebrow to which Kingsley immediately responded.

"I'm going with you."

With an indrawn groan she turned, carefully stepping over the trash that had been carelessly tossed, missing the alley's garbage bin, and stopped dead.

Passing the opening where the side alley converged with Diagon Alley's bustling main avenue was a familiar head of dark hair, and Harry was sprinting along at a healthy gait.

"He can watch out for himself can he?"

Without a word she ignored the sarcastic jibe, taking off after Harry with murderous intent. Of all the ill fated timing that one could have, she had the worst. Harry just had to pick now to run off, and she had every intention of strangling him once she got a hold of him.

Of course she may have to stun him first, considering he had grown considerably to tower several inches above her, making him significantly faster.

Aw hell, she'd always been good at stunning.

As they shoved their way through the street, Kingsley's golden loop earring glinting in the sunshine, she began ticking off the various ways to kill or torture him. For out of all the Order members she was his strongest proponent when it came to the degree of independence he should be afforded. After all, she had attested to Harry's ability to distinguish when it was or was not appropriate to wander off in public places. However, with Kingsley standing behind her, Harry was proving her wrong yet again. She could only imagine the self-satisfied

smile crossing Kingsley's face, and after he mentioned this to the Order...

Her appeal to let Harry in on more of the Orders' activities would probably be rejected, yet again.

This little stunt of his was going to cost him more than he knew.

"I'm going to kill him when I get a hold of him," Kingsley grumbled behind her, wrinkling his nose at the mingled scents stemming from the apothecary.

"Not if I get a hold of him first," Tonks grumbled, thinking on how this little stroll of his would probably cost Harry his allowance into the Order, and he would never even know it.

She began muttering in dangerous undertones, for she'd make damn sure he found out.

Fixing her eyes to the back of his head, she shortened her hair up her neck, and began experimenting with noses. It wasn't until she spotted the old woman calmly perusing the selection of animal food on display outside of Eeylops Owl Emporium that she was struck with an excellent idea.

"Excuse me mam, I'm going to need to commandeer that cane of yours."

It was a marvel that he had managed to keep her in sight, considering the horde swarming around him, children screaming off items that would be needed for the start of term to frazzled parents, most of whom were doing admirable balancing acts with newly purchased cauldrons, books, and potions supplies. Though her hair color helped, for it was neither dark nor light, falling somewhere between bronze and gold, yet far from blonde. He had seen the color rarely, and he doubted ever naturally, before now. Regardless, it made her easier to keep track of her.

Thus it was that he was unable to miss her purposeful march into Knockturn Alley, his stomach churning uncomfortably at the thought.

It was not a situation he liked. In fact, he would much rather prefer to avoid it all together. Yet the way Hagrid had been treating this girl, it seemed she was new to the hive that was Diagon Alley, and she very well may have just made a grievous, and possibly life threatening, mistake.

He knew the consequences of such errors far too well.

Pulling his wand out he cast a glamour charm upon his head, watching the unruly strand of hair hanging on his forehead lighten to a muted brown. Quickly he brushed as much of it over his forehead as possible, not keen to be recognized within the disreputable area he was now traversing through.

The dark entrance was rather twisted, the space narrow and curving every few feet, thus she easily fell out of his line of sight. And it was not without incident that he made it through this, having to grunt at a haggard looking woman to drive home his point that he indeed did not want to buy the cadaver toes she was selling.

"Maybe next time young lad, next time..." She hawked after him, driving his pace to increase.

And increase it did, just in time for him to see Kalliandra disappearing through the entrance of Borgin & Burkes.

Making a hasty decision, and silently praising Fred and George for their generosity that day when they had visited the Weasley twin's establishment, Harry crept past the shaded windows displaying Borgin & Burkes on 'special' items, casting a surreptitious glance through the dirt covered panes.

The image was vague, distorted by the thick layer of grime coating the window, but Kalliandra's approach stirred the man knelt behind the counter, his hands rummaging through his glass display case like a rat in a hole.

An indistinct word fell from the girl's lips, and with a sudden jolt of movement the man stood, mouth spluttering indistinct words in a hoarse fashion.

It was an arranged meeting, or a meeting between two who were uncomfortably acquainted.

Neither prospect boded well.

It was suddenly obvious that she had entered here knowing full well what kind of place it was.

Making a decision as the man began pacing, Harry dropped to the filthy ground, allowing an overturned cart to conceal him from the majority of the scant traffic upon the alley.

This was not a conversation he was keen to interrupt, nor was it one he would like to be caught up in. Not in this place, not when the participants were so engrossed.

Pressing his ear to the thin, flaking wood paneling upon the establishment's exterior, he muttered a charm for hearing enhancement, bringing the ill-boded conversation to life.

Through the creaking of aged, rotting wood, Kalliandra's intonations mingled with the proprietor's pacing.

"...ank you. I appreciate your honesty."

"I have little use for honesty, and much for business," Rased the man, whose voice Harry now recognized to be that of Borgin's Proprietor, Mr. Borgin himself. "Your correspondence was intriguing, and what you are offering in return..."

"Is something I'd prefer to not be discussed openly," She interrupted coolly. "There are those who would assume much."

The pacing of Borgin vanished, the creaking of ill-suited flooring ceasing.

"Of course," Borgin's rattled breath shot out. "Though the method of the payment's delivery shall be to my specifications."

"That is fine," She clipped back. "And my order?"

A racking cough shook the proprietor, Harry shuddering at the reverberations as the words a month's time were spoken.

Then there was silence, enticing him to slowly slide up the splintery siding, his eyes reaching the sill to peer inwards, just in time for the dilapidated door to be thrown open.

And so it was that Kalliandra stuttered to a stop at the sight of the half-crouching man, who had clearly been listening in.

"He who angers you conquers you."
Elizabeth Kenny

Chapter 4 Seed of Distrust

Perhaps it was the shuddering weakness that had plagued her body so oft as of late, but seeing the messy haired Potter upon the ground was a sight for which she had been ill prepared, the sheer shock sending her insides reeling and curling into unnatural knots as she blinked at him, his own face averted as if stalling for time.

Drawing breath between her teeth the pieces fell into place, forming an unpleasing pattern.

Choking back the sick sensation threatening to crawl from her throat, she spun on her heel, strewing grimy dust in her wake and hell bent on distancing herself from the meddling fool as much as possible.

Silently she thanked God, the one of whose existence she was still disbelieving, for her prudence at having said nothing more than necessary.

Tucking a lock of darkened gold behind her ear, effectively removing the wayward strand from her face, she rounded the first twist in the crooked alley, passing a street vendor selling ears of something that sounded suspiciously like 'house elves'. It was in this moment of distraction that a firm grip fell upon her upper arm, the calluses on the hand evident as she reflexively yanked her arm away, stepping away to distance herself from the prat bold enough to make such a gesture.

Unsurprisingly she was unable to even turn around before Potter was again upon her, ushering her to the other side of the besmirched area, away from the street vendor. She wasted no time in distancing herself from the Potter prat, fishing around for his first name, which she could not remember.

Casting a suspicious glance at the crinkled vendor she felt distinctly nervous, even with the man's crazy eyes 10 yards off, for he was clearly out of earshot. Dismissing the momentary concern that

wizards could possibly have superior hearing she felt her eyes narrowing into darkened slits.

To Potter's credit, his mouth was already opening in explanation, but she cut him off.

"How much did you hear?" She hissed quietly.

His jaw clamped shut, an unsure look overtaking his features, as if he had no clue on how to answer her question.

Another moment passed between them in silence, the shadows cast by the looming brick walls of the alley traveling such a scant distance that their movement would have been indiscernible to the human eye, had either present paid the darkness any mind, though they did not.

Still the messy haired man before her did not speak, his silence allowing her the time she needed to collect her harshly shaken demeanor.

No one had been meant to know of her liaison with Borgin. No one.

As Potter's silence continued she was left only to nod, expressing her discernment of his actions.

"Listen," She whispered, being careful to keep her voice low. "I want you to stay away from me, and my conversations."

Potter's face was oddly contorted, as if unable to decide upon frowning or glaring in suspicion. "Why are you so alarmed about me overhearing that?"

"Why do you think?" She hissed scathingly.

"Couldn't say, but you're awfully concerned about that conversation remaining private," He stated pointedly, apparently having no qualms about keeping his voice down. "Why the concern if you have nothing to hide?"

She visibly bristled.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," She said slowly, taking the time to enunciate each syllable. "But most people do not take well to having their private conversations listened in on."

"Most people don't wander down Knockturn Alley to speak in code with shady proprietors," He countered challengingly.

"I'm failing to recall any code," She refuted, her brow furrowing. "Though I'm also failing to remember how this is any of a complete stranger's business."

His dark, forest-like eyes met her staid gaze levelly, without apology, while a woman with a torn, tattered gray shawl limped around the corner, leaning heavily on a claw footed cane. Neither spoke as the woman shambled along, quietly croaking out a melody of sorts about bat wings and who-ding-its.

As soon as the woman neared the weave of the alley, becoming interested in street vendor's merchandise, Potter closed the distance between them, his shoes disturbing the deep claw marks that the elder's cane had left indented in the soiled ground.

"Look," He began, sounding much calmer, "I didn't follow you to overhear anything, I just..."

"You just happened to follow me," She cut in unapologetically, "And then you must have randomly decide to crouch down and eavesdrop?"

Potter took another step forward, eyes intimidating.

"Yes."

Sucking in a half frustrated, half furious breath she suppressed the urge to kick something, him in particular. "Alright Potter, if that's the case, then why did you follow me?"

His look was nothing short of derisive, the look of one trying to explain a simple concept to a small child incapable of grasping it.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," He said, his sarcastic word usage not missed, "But weren't you supposed to be waiting for Hagrid back at Madam Maulkins?"

"Did it ever occur to you that I had places to go that Hagrid had no need to know about?"

In the dark shade of the alley, his eyes took on a suspicious, disapproving glint. "Why shouldn't he know?"

"What are you my keeper?" She snapped scathingly, finally losing her temper, brushing a lock of hair away from her eyes in frustration.

His eyes narrowed immediately. "You're avoiding the question."

"And you're being a complete..."

"A complete what?" He cut in, glowering as she lapsed into silence.

"Look," He finally said, "If your business here was harmless why risk venturing here alone? Why not tell Hagrid and have him come with you?"

She kicked the ground in frustration, scattering tiny rocks in his direction. "So you're telling me that you inform Hagrid about everything you do? Because if that's not the case..."

"That's not the point," He interrupted, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Oh I think it's very much the point," She snapped acidly, noticing his hands curling into tight fists within his pockets.

"Look..." He muttered, "I just followed you because I thought you were supposed to wait for Hagrid. And when I got here I could tell it wasn't a conversation I should be walking in on..."

"And spying was a better option?" She shot out incredulously.

"That's not what I meant..."

"Sure sounds like it."

"Well I wouldn't have even been there if you hadn't walked out in the first..." He shot out defensively.

"Don't you dare..."

"Now really, what discussion was so important that it required you to trek into Knockturn Alley to speak in hushed tones behind a closed door? Because seriously Kalliandra, I'd love to know," He snapped with mock seriousness, yanking his hands from his pockets and crossing his arms.

She glared harshly. "That is none of your business you miserable blo..."

"Miserable bloke?" He cut in. "You've got..."

Turning on her heel she shoved past him, brushing off his arm that attempted to halt her progress as she stalked away. Purposely dragging her feet enough to send a strew of grimy dust in his direction, she felt a detached sense of satisfaction at his indignant coughing.

"Will you..." He grunted. "Just stop..." She rounded a crooked turn, the light of Diagon Alley seeping into the dimly lit corridor. "Because..."

Continuing to ignore him she stepped out into the bright light, allowing the bustling, shoving, chattering crowd to swallow her whole.

Removing the shawl Tonks smiled maniacally, partly due to her relief at being away from the amazingly putrid odor of the house elf ear vendor, and partly because she was enjoying her old woman disguise too much.

"Out of me way!" She snapped in a scratchy voice, effectively clearing the area as people scattered in every direction. Anything to avoid getting whacked upside the head by the old lady with the sharp cane.

Grinning with sadistic pleasure she passed where Kingsley sat, casually reading the paper at Florean Forescue's Ice Cream Parlor. Wasting not a second she yanked him up with her, dragging him with her after the two teens.

Kingsley yanked out his ear piece, the one that had allowed him to hear everything she had.

"Tonks drop the old woman diatribe, you're mucking it up and sound like a pirate."

She threw her head back and cackled, sending a small group of children, first years by the looks of them, scattering.

"Oh being old is fun!" She related. "I should do this more often!"

Kingsley now appeared to be thumping himself in the head with the rolled up sports section.

Maintaining their ambling pursuit, she was having trouble grasping Harry's conversation due to the noise of the crowd. Knockturn Alley had been deserted in comparison, but fortunately they were able to stay relatively close due to her tendency to knock anyone unlucky enough to walk in front of them in the back of the knee with the claw footed cane.

"Remind me why we didn't just confront them?" Kingsley grumbled unhappily.

"Well one," She said cheerfully, "Do you really think they'd be upfront about what they're little rendezvous was about? And two, this is just so much more fun!"

Kingsley groaned. "And here I thought you were the one against following Harry around."

"Details!" She shot back, "Besides, if I'm going to throttle him I at least need to hear that I have a good reason."

"I'd have a few for throttling you..."

Smiling cheekily she ignored him. "Watch and learn from the master Kingsley. Watch and learn."

Kingsley snorted. "I thought I was the master."

"Oh?" She questioned, "So I guess it is okay to refer to you as that."

"You're really aiming to get that personalized, permanently stuck name plate aren't you?"

"You wouldn't."

"What makes you think not?"

Smirking she did her best to keep Harry's head in sight, walloping her procured cane against a man too busy posturing for a Veela look alike to notice the bustling crowd swarming around him.

She let out another cackle, turning to Kingsley. "If you put a nameplate on my office it'll..."

"You don't have an office."

She frowned. "Someday I might."

"Not if you keep this up."

Groaning she whacked her boss with the cane, appeased by the fact that a six foot plus man was now hopping up and down on one foot courtesy of her.

"Now that I've got your attention..."

He groaned.

"If you do that it'll permanently remind you of me, and you wouldn't want that now would you?"

Right then Kingsley looked very much like he would love to drown himself in the water basin outside of Eeylops Owl Emporium. It was a shame the owls drinking from it looked murderous.

It took another second for the information to process within her mind, for it was a relatively clear area, and Harry had just drug the girl over there.

Each and every single owl was glaring in their direction.

As she traversed her way amongst the moving sea of bodies, the heady pressure of commercial commerce hung heavily in the air. The mixing aromas from the apothecary, ice cream parlor, and owl emporium blended with that of the joke shop's scented smoke bombs, while candles burned mid-wick in every storefront window, lending the area a unique flavor.

In Kalliandra's frustration she noticed little of this. So fixated upon distancing herself from the messy haired man behind her was she, that she missed taking in the few sights that she had deemed worthy of a second glance when she had traversed in the opposite direction scarcely a quarter of an hour before hand.

Now it was taking all her reserves to avoid pulling violently away from the rough, calloused hand that had just shot through the crowd, grasping her firmly by the upper arm.

She knew full well who it was.

Hardly aware of the loose pebbling overlaying the cobblestone avenue, or of the continuous influx of patrons pouring from the shops into the street, pressing in around them on all sides in a way that encouraged one to not deter from the speed that the crowd had

reached a general, non-verbal consensus regarding, she found herself whirling around to face him, halting.

"What?" She snapped pointedly, looking squarely into his dark green, and currently unhappy looking, eyes.

"I wasn..."

A voluminous man shoved past, cutting Potter off as he failed to take heed of the two individuals speaking a foot below his rather freakish height. In the process he smacked against them brusquely, their heads banging together hard, and she found herself kicking a spray of pebbles in the man's direction, oddly satisfied as the man halted, swore, and turned in place looking for the perpetrator of the attack on his calves.

"Making friends everywhere I see," Potter commented dryly, tugging her along after him until they had abandoned the street altogether. And the moment their feet reached the cement replacement Potter released her, eyes hard and serious.

"I wasn't done talking," He said pointedly.

"Well I was."

"Perhaps you wouldn't have been," He argued annoyingly as they set off, walking along their new path, which lay along the haphazardly constructed sidewalk that had a tendency to move, bend, and crack on a whim. "I tried to apologize, but you were too argumentative to let me finish."

"Oh was I?" She inquired with mock seriousness, hopping over a step that had spontaneously sprung from the path. "Perhaps you should learn what a proper apology entails, and forgive me for being argumentative, but I was the one tripping over a spying bafo..."

"Well you were acting suspicious!" He cut in, her unfinished insult hanging in the air.

"How in the hell was I acti..."

Her exclamation was cut off by his derisive snort, and her face contorted into an angry scowl.

Studying him carefully for a moment as a hoard of kids ran past, she gave a curt nod, indicating the top of his head. "Wasn't your hair a different color?" She spat it like it was a crime.

Again she found him regarding her as if she were a small child to whom a particularly simple problem proved daunting.

"I'm not sure," He mused. "Was it?"

She bit back an angry growl, and suddenly found her progress again halted. She threw a glare at him.

"Let. Go."

He smirked as if amused. "Well correct me if I'm wrong, but if you're trying to meet up with Hagrid this would be a good place to stay."

"Oh?" She snapped. "And whys that?"

Potter let out an exhausted sigh, dragging her to retrace their last few steps until they stood in front of a small drinking trough, a long stick extending over it, several owls perched upon it, and he gestured inside the storefront window.

Sure enough, through the window, Hagrid could be seen purchasing a ridiculously large bag of Boarhound Pet Chow.

Potter turned to her with a viper like grin. "So," He inquired. "Care to tell me what you were doing before or after Hagrid gets out here?"

Only she did not answer, for her eyes were drawn to the owls besides them. Slowly, instinctively, she took a step back, the slanted lines of the barn owls faces unnerving as a sharp clacking, the distinctive sound of powerful beaks snapping shut in succession, began.

It was the threatening, defensive behavior of an animal whose territory had just been breached, as was the fanning of wings, which the tawny and saw whet, side by side, were currently doing.

Potter's brow crinkled oddly, the owls territorial behaviors not ceasing until Kalliandra had backed away, her heels teetering off the edge of the sidewalk into the street.

He was still frowning when Hagrid came outside, Fang's food sack slung over his wide shoulder.

The Professor spotted them immediately.

"Heya 'arry. Madam Maulkin done torturin' Ron I take it?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly..."

"Eh well, it 'appens," Hagrid commented nonsensically, eyes darting beneath his thick scruff of hair between the two of them. "Ye two gettin' on well are ye?"

Not exactly... But he did not have a chance to comment as Hagrid clapped him rather hard on the back.

"Good to 'ear Harry, Good to 'ear."

It was clear that Hagrid was hardly paying attention, to him at least. To Kalliandra however...well, the half giant was observing her as if she were a sick hippogriff about to go off. Not that he could blame him, with the way she stood teetering on the curb away from them both, rubbing her shoulder, a slight grimace gracing her mouth.

The quiet, almost pained individual before him appeared to be the polar opposite of the girl he had bickered with along the streets.

Something was extremely wrong.

"Yer okay there Kally?" Hagrid asked, apparently noticing the peculiarity as well.

"I'm fine Hagrid," She responded dully. Her hand fell from her shoulder quickly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I just got jostled a bit in the crowd," She glanced up for the briefest of seconds, the forced smile she cast not reaching her eyes. And just as quickly as before, her eyes were again down-turned to the street. Very quietly, almost as afterthought, she quietly muttered, "I'm getting sick of everyone asking me that."

"Yes well, it will 'appen to yer..." Hagrid muttered, once again, the words meaningless and confusing, as if a part of a conversation in which he was not a participant.

"Ready to leave?"

Her question was pointed, as was her gaze, still directed at the cold ground.

"Well ye want ter get yer pet now er..."

"I don't think that's a very good idea," She muttered, her eyes still avoiding anything save for the payment, her mannerisms bordering on frightened.

"Well ye 'ave to deal with it eventually."

Biting her lower lip she nodded, several long tresses falling to obscure the left side of her face. "I know," She whispered, eyes lowered to the ground.

Hagrid just nodded gruffly, glancing at her with the air of a concerned parent ready to pounce.

The entire exchange was perhaps his most confusing one to date, and he had thus far, not been a participant.

"Look, yer can't take Silverthorne to call with yer..."

"Silverthorne?" Harry cut in, hoping to perhaps catch a smidgen of coherency.

"A thestral," Hagrid supplied absentmindedly, and at that word Harry couldn't help it.

He turned an incredulous look to the side of her head, the only part of her face still visible. "A thestral is your pet?"

He swore she nearly laughed. "No Potter. Silverthorne is no one's pet. We just have an understanding."

Now he had to admit that they had been useful at the end of last term, but to have an understanding with one? What the hell did that mean?

"So you can see them?" He finally asked, at a loss.

Turning her head towards them again, her eyes still avoiding the owls like a plague, she shot him an odd look. "Yeah, why couldn't I? I'm not blind."

Hagrid's sudden look of panic didn't escape him, nor did it Kalliandra as she shot him a questioning look, to which the Care of Magical Creatures Professor cowered slightly.

He decided to save him the trouble of answering. "Well not everyone can see the..."

"Why not?" She asked sharply.

"Because you can't see them unless you've seen someo..." He stopped short, seeing the look Hagrid was shooting him.

Her brow crinkled in annoyance, and Hagrid's voice came out, suddenly pacifying.

"Now Kalliandra yer know 'ow some things 're..."

This tactic only elicited a small noise of displeasure from her.

Frustrated, Harry supplied the information for her.

"You can't see them unless you've seen someone die."

Wrong choice.

There was no verbal exchange, but her eyes darkened, speaking volumes.

"Are yer alri..." Hagrid started cautiously.

"Yes," She whispered.

"We can get yer pet later," Hagrid stammered. "That'd be..."

"Let's get this over with," She cut in, sweeping past them both into the store, her eyes remaining averted the entire time.

Hagrid let out a defeated sigh, rubbing his forehead with a large hand wearily, and the realization of what he had just done struck Harry like a lightning bolt.

She hadn't known, and he had probably just brought back whatever horrible memory her past had held...

Kalliandra quickly walked through the musty, noisy store, avoiding all live animal displays, she disappeared behind a large shelf stocked with rat feed, relief sweeping through her that no one was back there as her conflicted emotions threatened to rise to the surface. She had spent the past three weeks carefully building a wall of indifference around herself, and she couldn't afford to let it down now.

Not over such a trivial fact coming to light. Not when she had just spoken to the person who could give her the answers she needed.

Yet still...why hadn't they told her?

She knew the answer without asking, for to have been reminded of the reasons behind her presence here in any way...it would only serve to remind her of her own self loathing for all she had done.

A slight tremor coursed through her, and sighing sadly she listened to the soft hooting amidst the rafters. She would not look at them, for she had seen the reactions that elicited enough.

Yet the hooting continued, more persistent, and somewhere in the carnal recesses of her mind she knew her very presence there was a bad idea, a poor choice of both Dumbledore's and Hagrid's judgment.

Facing obstacles was apparently a healthy thing, even when it generally resulted in having irate owls attempting to bite oneself.

With a great degree of trepidation she found herself tilting her head up to peer through the dark, cluttered atmosphere of the shop, her eyes slowly adjusting, pupils widening in the dim lighting as the lower rafters slowly came into view.

Owl upon owl rested upon them, some peacefully sleeping, their heads carefully nestled into the folds of their feathers, while the rest had trained their alert, shining eyes upon her.

The menacing clacking of beaks being threateningly opened and snapped shut began to once again, fill the room near her.

"So you think you'll get one of them?"

Cringing, though almost glad for the distraction, she turned her attention slowly to Potter, who now stood in front of her. To his credit, he at least had the common sense to look apprehensive.

"Look, Kalliandra, I'm sorry. I didn't realize..."

"It's fine," She muttered, for she did not need his pity.

Despite this, she could not help but keep a furtive eye on him, as she pretended to peruse the owl selection, her eyes carefully avoiding all of the owls, and she was a bit surprised to see a downcast, yet determined, expression upon his face.

He followed her down the aisle. "I don't think it is."

"Like it matters to you," She whispered quickly, silently reminding herself of all the predatory behaviors to avoid.

Do not make eye contact... Keep your head lowered... No loud noises or sudden movements...

Like that would actually help in calming these poor woodland creatures, for it certainly had little effect on the one with supposedly the larger brain, Potter.

His expression had faltered at her last words. "You know I'm at least making an effort."

"You shouldn't have bothered."

Groaning he raised his hands, folding them behind his head. "You're right, I don't know why I did."

"Wonderful," She murmured sarcastically, traversing her way along the back wall.

"You know..." A raucous hissing cut him off as an owl nipped at his raised hands. Potter jerked away hastily, nearly taking a wooden shelf with him.

"Bloody owl..." He grumbled, glaring up towards the offending bird, who by now had hopped down to the lowest rafter, where it screeched, its outstretched wings flapping vigorously.

For some absurd reason the situation struck her as funny rather than frightening, and she did not bother to suppress the laughter bubbling out while she observed the formidable looking owl. For once it was

not aimed at her. And as if sensing her scrutiny its dark eyes locked with her own.

Its territorial behavior ceased, drawing a smile to her face, for she wasn't the only one to lash out at those who came to close.

She traced the Great Horned owl's outline, noting the black coloration speckling its reddish brown wings, its catlike face and highly pointed ears all swiveled curiously towards her.

Then she noticed the small shackle imprisoning it, one end encircling its twig thin leg, the other binding it to the rafter it sat so miserably upon. It was caged, forbidden to go wherever it pleased.

Just...like...her.

It was perhaps the most foolish thing she had yet done, but she held out her arm hopefully, and watching its wings extend it gracefully flew to her, its shackles clinking haphazardly as it landed gently upon her arm. She eyed its magnificent dark eyes, noting how it was careful to not dig its talons into her skin, and she turned away from Potter, walking to the front counter as the owl re-perched upon its rafter, waiting for her to re-turn.

"You'll need a cage for him," Potter pointed out.

"He won't be needing it," She replied curtly.

"You're awfully personable aren't you?"

"Well..." She stopped at the counter wearily, speaking with an unusual amount of venom. "If you mean that I'm able to converse with nosy individuals than yes."

Potter turned in a frustrated huff, storming out of the store. She frowned, hating herself for her false ploys and pretenses, but her condition prevented her from behaving in any other manner.

A part of her mind nagged, chastising her for clinging to such a petty excuse for her behavior, but the other more rational side displayed the vividly horrific memories of a cold night gone by...

It was better to push everyone away.

For their own good, and for her own.

Hagrid held his friends dear. She'd rather die than endanger them by her mere association, and Potter was dangerous.

She watched him through the window, talking animatedly to Hagrid, and if she hadn't known better, she would have thought that he looked almost insulted.

A light weight descended upon her arm, jarring her from her thoughts as two dark eyes met hers. She smiled, her first true smile in weeks, ruffling the owls feathers. It hooted softly, and for a second, she could have sworn it silently understood.

Harry was once again, furious.

He simply did not get it. During their entire argument she had seemed so indifferent, almost untouchable. It was maddening how his snide remarks rolled off her, so he had kept at it, wanting to unconsciously vent some of his own frustrations into her and to discern what her actual business in Knockturn Alley had been.

He knew it was wrong. And he knew his behavior was uncharacteristically Malfoy-like. But at the time, he had not cared.

That was until thestrals had come up. He had glimpsed a smidgen of real human emotion within her then, and it was startling.

Or at least he thought he had. He must have been mistaken, because whatever it was he thought he had seen, had gone as soon as it had come.

The she had been the one making snide comments like Malfoy.

A cacophony of sounds emerged as the shop's door opened, emitting Kalliandra and her horribly moody owl. He grimaced at the sight, even as a chiding voice reminded him how an animal's behavior could so oft deceive.

Buckbeat's certainly had.

That was all forgotten though, for right then she raised her forearm high, and gray wings spread wide, feet and claws hopping from her arm as the owl took flight, circling in wide arcs until it disappeared above the rooftops of Diagon Alley.

"Kalliandra what in the blimey are yer doing? You just lost yer pet!" Hagrid exclaimed.

And to Harry's great surprise, she actually smiled. Her eyes seemed distant, as if she were looking into something that no one save her could see.

"Hagrid, he deserves to be free."

Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly."

Francis Bacon

Chapter 5 A Professor of One

Remus yawned tiredly, his light brown eyes skirted across the train platform at Hogsmeade, searching for the familiar form that was nowhere in sight. A light smile crossed his weary features and he chuckled. Hagrid was not someone he would easily miss had he been there. No invisibility cloak was quite that large.

"Hagrid..." He said, shaking his head amusedly. He picked up his briefcase, crossing the deserted, outdoor platform in the direction of Hogwarts.

It wasn't far, and Hagrid would undoubtedly intercept him along the way, most likely in his own, frenzied hurry to intercept him. Hagrid was a bit forgetful at times, and Remus could not fault him. He would be to if he took care of such a hazardous array of animals for a living.

The train platform was on the outskirts of the small village, on the outer edge nearest Hogwarts, and a pebbled road led directly to the school's front doors. He would turn off it before he reached Hogwarts' massive, welcoming entrance, to traverse his way across the lush, green grounds to Hagrid's hut.

Remus had never been close to the game keeper, but he respected the man immensely for his work in the Order.

He also empathized with him, and recently Hagrid had mentioned that he was one of the few who could truly hope to understand him.

He started walking, thinking how right Hagrid was.

The sun beat down on his pale shoulders, warming more than his shirt. The sun was rejuvenating to him in a way few understood, because it was a full orb of light for which he harbored no fear. It was funny, that the lightest of nights filled him with foreboding and pain, when usually it was the absence of light that inspired fear. He sought

solace in the darkest of nights, that was when he felt his best, but for now, when the moon was a quarter full, he would seek comfort in the warm afternoon sun.

It was because of this curse that he could empathize with Hagrid. The opportunity to become a fully qualified wizard had been stolen from the gamekeeper turned Professor, and it had nearly evaded even himself. Had it not been for Dumbledore's kindness Remus would never have studied magic. No other school would have taken him.

They had feared him.

The curse of being different, he thought bitterly. They were both labeled as dangerous by the wizarding community, and shunned. Their friends even suffered for their mere association.

A half-giant and a werewolf...two of the most dangerous magical beings on the planet, both seen as murderous, blood-thirsty beasts, and yet neither one of them possessed the inclination to harm another.

Weren't the painful transformations and premature aging enough? He shook his head, knowing the answer to that, because it wasn't.

No, he had to be shunned as well. Didn't they know he would change it if he could? And Hagrid...one of the most gentle, kind-hearted people he had ever met, yet the Ministry feared him and his giant heritage. They labeled him violent without even knowing him. He could at least understand why people feared him, but Hagrid was harmless. He at least was truly dangerous.

Several nights in his past stood in dark testament to that.

Because of his forgetfulness, Wormtail had gotten away on one of those nights. If he had only taken his potion, perhaps Voldemort would not have returned, perhaps Sirius would not have died...

Damn't Sirius! He had figured his friend's stubborn nature would have made him harder to kill, but in the end, he, just like James, had been as vulnerable as the rest.

He was the last now.

Peter was as good as dead, and if he ever saw him again... If he ever got the chance...

He'd make sure a finger really was all there was left of him.

He shuddered at the thought, remembering the words Lily had spoken to him, as he stood over his parents freshly dug graves.

"Even in the darkest of times, there are shimmers of light Moony. It's just a matter of finding them..."

It was something he had promised to show Harry. Harry was the only real family he had left, and he wanted the boy, who was quickly growing into a man, to know of the incredible strength his parents had held. He needed to know that there were things worth fighting for.

Lord knows he's already had his share of fighting...

We all have...

The thought sobered him, reminding him of his purpose today. He squinted ahead, shielding his eyes from the bright morning sun to look for any sign of Hagrid.

Today he would truly meet her.

He wasn't sure whether to be nervous, or to simply be exhilarated that the broken girl he had cradled had survived.

Kalliandra.

She had been thrust into their world unwillingly. Dumbledore, in all his wisdom, had felt Hogwarts to be the safest place for her. It would be a good way to help her adjust, by slowly exposing her to people her own age.

But unlike others her age, she lacked a prior five years of magical education, and any knowledge whatsoever of their world.

It would be his job to remedy that.

When Dumbledore had asked him, he had felt inadequate, poorly equipped for the task.

Dumbledore had set him down, much like he were once again the pupil and he the teacher, and told him he had never known another who he would trust more with her.

It was then that he had confided in him.

"When Voldemort was still the school boy, Tom Riddle, I feared what he may grow to be.

"When Harry came, I feared what loss may drive him to do.

"Now I fear what she may do to herself."

Not to mention what she could do to those around her. The memory of the night they had found her was still burned into his mind's eye. It was not something Remus would soon forget.

Doing his job right could mean the difference in this young woman's survival. Dumbledore had been very clear on that.

Now if only there was a witch or wizard out there equipped to deal with this. Only, there wasn't.

He knew the odds for her. He knew what she was facing, even if she did not. And he knew what so often happened to those with her ability.

By all rights he should be terrified and have run in the other direction.

Yet he could not bring himself to do so. Not when the image of her feeble body lying there, clad in mud and the blood of those she loved,

kept coming back to him each night as he dreamt. He felt a note of discord at the thought of anything worse befalling her.

Deep down he knew what it was to be judged, and he'd be damned if he did that to another breathing person on this planet.

And that was why, despite knowing all of this, that he had accepted the assignment. Dumbledore wanted her to have the same chance as everyone, and he had full heartedly agreed.

Now all he had to figure out was how to give it to her.

"The most worthwhile things in life are never easy..."

Her words came back, hitting him as fresh as if they had fallen from her lips only yesterday, and never before had they been more appropriate.

A sad smile lit his face. Only she could say something that's meaning would last decades.

Just like the pain...

Always so fresh, so sharp...

He still marveled at how so many spoke of healing, and forgetting. Pain did not vanish. It did not go away. You could not deal with it, for to deal would imply to fix. Instead you just learned how to live with it, without losing your mind.

Of course, the same people had often spoken on how well he dealt with pain, but he did not feel very good at that. He was just logical enough to know that there was no good in dwelling on what could have been. Things happened...bad things...whether you wanted them to or not, and nothing one said or did could change that.

If it did none of them would be gone...

And after all these years, she was still right. A smile formed on his lips, the joyful memories coming back, flooding his vision as he

remembered Padfoot's taunting about how she was 'always right', and they were 'always wrong'.

Her retort had been that it was about time they saw it her way.

He chuckled slightly, catching sight of Dumbledore making his way leisurely down the sparsely used road. He raised a hand in greeting, catching the Headmaster's attention, and was pleased to see an amused grin on the Headmaster's powerful face.

"Good Afternoon Remus."

"Likewise Albus," He said, shifting his briefcase to the other arm.

Dumbledore removed his half-moon spectacles, polishing them on his summer robes. "It's amazing, how the brilliant sun glare can make even the most tiny of smudges stand out, almost like the dark spot where the sun is supposed to be when a solar eclipse shields it."

The Headmaster held his glasses to the sun, studying them through his light, twinkling, currently squinted eyes, searching for any left over imperfections.

"But enough about the rattled musings of this grandfather clock's inner workings. How have you been? I trust the train's conductor wasn't too erratic with the speed for your young heart?"

Remus smiled broadly. Yes, in relaxed, social situations, Dumbledore was still the same.

"The train was fine, and I've been good. I was just thinking of some amusing arguments Cassilyda and Sirius had before."

Dumbledore replaced his glasses on his nose, looking off towards the sun as if seeing something far past it. "Ah...yes those two did have a penchant for arguments did they not? I seem to remember a certain James Potter walking in on one of them...it took Pomfrey all afternoon to get him straightened out. She was rather reluctant to change him back... Something about liking him better as a mute eel, unable to

cause mayhem on an hourly basis, locked up in a tank...I believe Lily had been particularly amused."

Remus smiled fondly, remembering the faces James and the eel had made, pressing his slimy, snakelike body against the glass walls of the fish tank. They had scooped him off the floor and conjured a tank quickly, filling it with water as soon as they had seen him flopping around on the stone floor.

Whether Lily had seen James or not before stepping on him had been a matter of debate for weeks.

Not to mention, in the hospital wing, when James had started trying to form letters with his long, serpent like body...

He chuckled slightly. He still wanted to know how James had contorted himself into an R... He shuddered thinking of how painful that spelling out 'You're a Dead Man Sirius' must have been.

"Quite an impressive bit of Transfiguration for fifth years... I gave Gryffindor House 20 points for that," Dumbledore mused aloud, turning his gaze on him, his eyes twinkling with amusement over the rim of his glasses. "I was sourly tempted to give out an award for Special Services to the School, since the Minister of Magic was visiting that day, and their "accident" rendered James incapable of doing something drastic, like turning the Minister's hair neon pink," Dumbledore grinned slyly at this. "Come to think of it I wouldn't entirely mind seeing that..."

Remus could only shake his head, suppressing the laughter threatening to come out. It was good seeing Dumbledore.

"Of course, in the end, no one could determine whose wand actually had transfigured young James at the time, so I couldn't give anyone the award. I was sourly disappointed by that."

"That was your only reason for not giving it?" He asked amused.

"Why yes Remus. Do you really think I would pass up a chance to encourage the propagation of good behavior when Ministry officials are visiting?"

"Not when Umbridge is the Ministry official," He replied, thinking of how Fred, George, Harry, Ron, and Ginny had described that impractical toad the year before.

"Ah yes...how is she doing in St. Mungos? I believe the verdict was temporary insanity?"

"It should have been permanent insanity and a life sentence in Azkaban. The toad was about to use an Unforgivable Curse on Harry!"

Dumbledore nodded curtly. "Ah, but the word would be 'unforgivable' and we are supposed to be forgiving. And speaking of forgiving I am taking it that Hagrid got distracted and was late meeting you?"

He nodded assent, finding the well known knowledge of Hagrid's quirk of untimeliness amusing.

Dumbledore grinned, "Well why don't we go see him together than Remus. I was just going to pay Madam Rosemereta a visit but my butterbeer can wait. Besides, if I am guessing his reason for being late to greet you...well...I may just be in need of some good, old fashioned fire whiskey."

He eyed Dumbledore curiously, "I didn't know you drank fire whiskey."

"But of course I don't..." He replied, winking mischievously. "I haven't had reason for such extravagant celebration since the Marauders graduation, granting me peace of mind and serenity again. Of course..." Dumbledore turned, waving for him to follow. "I'm not entirely sure I even have a mind left, with which to enjoy the serenity with."

Remus opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came forth. Instead he found himself following the Headmaster across the lawn, Hagrid's cabin quickly coming into sight as Dumbledore continued idle chitchat.

"...Now of course the key in those situations is managing the brew in reasonable amounts, a talent my dear brother does not possess," Dumbledore said, referring to his goat herder brother's drinking habits.

"Half my year didn't possess that talent," He replied, thinking of the one time he, James, Sirius, and Peter had gotten a hold of a bottle of Firewhiskey their 7th year. That had not gone over well... Fortunately Pomfrey had bought the excuse that all of them had caught the flu from each other. His thoughts were abruptly cut off as a loud, deep booming noise, sounding oddly like a fire cracker going off, met his ears. His attention turned towards the source, which was immediately apparent upon seeing the sight in front of him.

Hagrid and a young girl with golden hair were having a row. Only Hagrid seemed to be doing most of the yelling, while the girl just huffily picked up rock after rock from the side of the hut, flinging them with unusual vigor and accuracy, at an unsuspecting tree trunk, which was taking the brunt of her very visible frustration.

"Why hello Hagrid! Hello Kalliandra!" Dumbledore called out cheerfully, as if nothing were amiss.

Hagrid's voice immediately died down and the girl waved slightly before walking pointedly off towards the woods, where she stood blowing into her cupped hands, an odd whistling sound emitting from them.

He found himself looking between the girl at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, Hagrid's angry, red face, and Dumbledore's happy one.

"Hello there Remus. How yer doing today?" Hagrid replied, sounding rather strained. He looked strained too, because at the moment he wouldn't have been surprised to see steam coming out of the Professor's ears.

"Better than you it seems. What was all that about?"

"Oh that," Hagrid said angrily. "That would be abou' Kalliandra bein' difficult. Seems she went er...snoopin' aroun' Knockturn Alley t'day."

Dumbledore seemed unperturbed. "Hrm...curious. I suppose it's only natural for her to seek out information though, and what better place than there? Wouldn't you agree Hagrid?"

Hagrid shook his head, sending his scruffy hair awry. "No sir. She shouldn' hafta be findin' things out dat way. It woulda bin all me fault though if she...if she had..."

"No use working yourself up about things that did not happen Hagrid," Dumbledore consoled, offering a reassuring smile.

Remus continued listening to the ensuing conversation, but his attention was elsewhere as he turned to see Kalliandra standing next to a thestral, which was profusely nuzzling her like a long, lost friend. Thestrals weren't exactly dangerous, but they weren't exactly friendly either.

One would never know how she had barely clung to life only weeks before.

He shook the images away.

"Hagrid what exactly is she doing?" He was having a hard time standing idly by with a thestral's sharp teeth nuzzling so close to his future pupil's neck.

"Oh," Hagrid huffed out, still sounding slightly annoyed. "That there be Silverthorne. He's a thestral."

"Well I can see that. I meant what is she..." He grasped for the right word unsuccessfully.

"Doing?" Dumbledore supplied amusedly.

"Yes," He replied embarrassedly. Sometimes the simplest word was what he was looking for.

"She bloody well talks to him more than she bloody talks to me," Hagrid grumbled. "Tells him everythin' from the looks of it and ye should see them, traversing' around at all hours of the day. Real spitfire that one is! Bloody well good luck teachin' her Remus! Bin havin' enough trouble gettin' Care of Magical Creatures down 'er throat and she actually likes that. Can't imagine how she'll be with somethin' like Transfigurwhatsitcalled..."

"You mean to say that she's bonded with an animal?" He mused, interrupting Hagrid's ramble.

"To hell with it! You'd think she actually understood what that one be sayin' half da time!" Hagrid muttered exasperatedly, a wounded look on his face. "She'll talk to that there animal and get to arguin' with me!"

Remus was thoughtful for a moment. "So she likes animals of the night..." He commented, turning to face both of them. "Well, then I won't have too much trouble then, now will I?"

Dumbledore nodded in agreement, smiling to himself. He couldn't have picked a more perfect person to tutor her. Now lets see if he can save her, he thought to himself, silently hoping for the best.

"She bloody set it free?" Ron exclaimed in disbelief.

Harry nodded, chucking his newly bought school books onto his bed in Grimmauld Place. "That's what I said wasn't it?"

"But...it's an owl!" Ron stammered, clearly not getting it. "You can't set an owl free can you? I mean...they like...fly..."

"Very good Ron. Glad to see you know that a bird can fly," Hermione interjected, rolling her eyes as she entered their room, setting herself down onto the corner of his bed.

Ron gaped at her, looking strangely like a fish with protruding eyes.

"You know with your mouth open like that you can almost pass for a goldfish," She clipped scornfully.

Harry cringed inwardly on Ron's behalf. Hermione had been short with them ever since the three had re-grouped in Diagon Alley, only for him to hastily recount his story to them, and for Ron to just as hastily agree that Kalliandra was an insufferable twit.

Hermione, forever insufferably logical, had insisted on having the entire afternoon recounted word for word, and while she had admitted that the conversation had sounded suspicious, she felt that they were both over-reacting. He had even been forced to endure a long lecture about how wrong of him it was to eavesdrop as he had.

He had immediately pointed out that she had had no problem whatsoever when Malfoy was the one he was eavesdropping on, which had earned him a sharp tut and another tangent about how he should have done more to make the girl welcome.

In her opinion, if Hagrid and Dumbledore trusted the girl, than they should too. End of story.

Ron had kindly pointed out that Hagrid also trusted Aragog, all dragons including Hungarian Horntails, and that he considered his little brother to be 'tamed.' End of story.

It was right about then that Ron had made the mistake of calling Kalliandra several choice names, including a plain, ugly witch, which earned an infuriated round from Hermione about how 'ridiculously superficial' they were being. He was unable to follow her entire tirade, but it ended with her concluding that both of them seemed to be 'blatantly misjudging' the girl on looks alone.

Yes...Ron had evidently hit a nerve, and at risk of further igniting her already roaring temper he avoided pointing out that he for one was definitely not prejudicing her on looks, because if he was he would be

treating her like Ron did Fleur Delacour, rather than like the Black Plague.

Fortunately Harry did not mention any of these thoughts, got smart, and went quiet.

He wished he could say the same for Ron though.

"Still in a fine mood I see," Ron grumbled, shoving the bag with his new dress robes into the top dresser drawer.

Hermione's nose wrinkled in obvious disgust. "Aren't you even going to hang those up?"

"No. It's not like there are any girls here."

"So I suppose I'm a man is that it?" Hermione questioned icily.

"Unfortunately yes," Ron countered. "And a rather hot-headed know-it-all at that." Harry caught his friend mumbling.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Oh nothing Hermione," Ron replied with exaggerated formality. "I was just saying what a lovely job you did defending that uptight, Slytherin bound..."

"I highly doubt she is Slytherin bound."

"Is too! Mark my words she'll be in Slytherin! Sneaking off on Hagrid and having suspicious conversations! You heard what Harry said about her..."

"And from the sounds of it he was rather rude and made her feel unwelcome Ronald!" Hermione snapped angrily. He glared at Ron. He did not want to get brought back into this.

"And I met her for only five minutes and could tell she was..."

"Was what Ronald! You can't tell anything about a person after only meeting them for five minutes!"

"You didn't even meet her!" Ron shot back, his face growing slightly red as he flopped angrily down onto the bed across from his, staring pointedly up at the ceiling.

"I...Well...At least I'm not passing judgment on her!"

"You are too! Just because it happens to be a positive judgment doesn't mean that it's not a judgment..."

"All I'm saying is that she's Hagrid's friend and we should at least give her a chance!"

"They didn't sound very friendly to me did they Harry?" Ron asked, directing his question at him.

Once again thank you for bringing me into this, he thought sarcastically, looking between Ron and Hermione's expectant expressions. He suppressed a groan, waiting for the retaliation that was about to come.

"They did at the robe shop..." Hermione's face broke into a triumphant grin, but he quickly added, "but not at the pet store." Hermione's face fell as Ron let out a triumphant woot.

"See Hermione!"

"Yes, I do see Ronald. I see a carrot-topped prat who's way too eager to pass judgment on anyone but himself!" She stood abruptly. "If that closed minded brain of yours is actually capable of intelligence then try to remember that you passed judgment on me our first year and were wrong!" She spun on her heel, stomping loudly. "If you can remember that is. But hopefully the effort to think is not too taxing, it'd be a pity if your head exploded!" With that she stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

Only after the walls shook as her own door slammed across the hall did Ron sit up, grinning triumphantly. "And apparently I was right because she still think she knows it all!"

The door to their room flew upon, revealing a livid looking Hermione.

"I can't believe you!" She yelled angrily, looking ready to hex Ron at any moment.

Ron's grin vanished, his face gone slightly pale. "But...your door shut...How did you..."

"A door can be slammed by someone from either side, like from the hallway Ronald." She snapped, this time leaving the door wide open as she stormed off, granting them both quite a view as she vigorously flung her own door behind her this time.

Ron was right on her heels, like usual. "Mione come on...I said I'm sorry..."

"No you didn't!" Came Hermione's shrill, but muffled reply.

"Well I just..."

Harry tuned them out. This had happened three times just that week, all when something trivial set one or the other of off, and it always escalated into this melee. Usually Ron wound up standing outside her door, pleading for forgiveness, like he could now hear him doing.

He leaned back with a loud groan onto his bed. He sincerely hoped Ron asked her out soon, because he wasn't sure how many more of their bickering induced headaches he could take.

"We must die to one life, before we can enter another."
Anatole France

Chapter 6 Power of Persuasion

"You'll have to be quicker than that."

Kalliandra coughed loudly from her position, flat on her back.

"If I didn't know better..." she rasped. "I'd think you actually enjoyed torturing me."

Remus Lupin smiled, extending his hand to haul her roughly to her feet. "On the contrary Ms. Kaylens. I don't enjoy rendering you unconscious at all."

She nodded, brushing the grass off the back of her jeans.

"I enjoy seeing your reactions once I revive you."

She stopped what she was doing, pulling her grass covered, green-stained hands back in front of her. "Don't you know it's not good to provoke someone who has been stunned nine times in a row?"

He shook his head, an expression of pure innocence crossing his features. "I have to get you angry enough to attack me properly somehow don't I?"

"Spoken like a true dueling instructor," she stated, groaning inwardly.

For the past three hours Remus had been teaching her the not so subtle art of stunning. As it turned out, stunning was one of the few things she could actually do.

Unfortunately being able to do something, and being good at it, were entirely different matters.

This probably explained why she had just woken up on the ground. Then again, the fact that Remus had become incontrovertibly

determined to make sure that she could actually use stunning in a duel, if ever attacked, was also part of the reason.

The same paid instructor was not eyeing her critically. "You know Kally, if you manage to dodge my first attack you usually do quite nicely. Now just stop diving to the right every time. It's getting predictable."

She scowled. "Couldn't you have told me that a bit earlier?" she grumbled, feeling a bit queasy. The queasiness was not nearly as bad as the headache though.

Not that she would admit that to Lupin.

He had only become her tutor a little over a week ago, yet she had come to respect him. He did not pity her, or walk on glass with his conversations like Dumbledore and the others did.

Instead he talked to her like a human being, and somehow, when he was around, she found herself forgetting some of the pain she had brought down upon herself.

It almost felt as if he actually wanted her to learn. It was as if she were more than an assignment to him, more than a job that Dumbledore was paying him for.

For some reason the idea that the man may actually like her was calming.

"Shall we try again?" he asked, clearly unaware of her thoughts.

She trudged back to her starting position in response. She would not be the one to quit today. Of course, he should know that by now. She had learned the importance of outlasting one's opponent a long time ago. Outlasting fatigue and pain could mean the difference between winning, and losing.

And somehow she did not think the bastards, who had taken everything from her, would go easy on her simply because she had a headache.

She closed her eyes, bracing herself as an onslaught of ash filled memories greeted her mind's eye. Almost intuitively, Remus allowed her these few moments of collection, and when the anger boiled hot within her blood, she opened her eyes, remembering what she had promised herself.

She would make the bastards pay.

But first she needed to learn to do a simple stunning spell without passing out.

"Ready?" Remus asked, stomping his feet on the ground almost impatiently.

"Why not?"

"On three then. One," Remus started counting.

"Two," she supplied back loudly.

"Three! Stupefy!"

She threw herself to the ground before the hot streak reached her, mentally screaming the words.

The strange sensation flew through her, burning through her blood as it moved, jolting the spell towards its target. Her vision swam before she saw him collapse, and she fell weakly upon the ground, shakily breathing in the damp summer scent of mud and grass.

Slowly, painstakingly, the prickling tracing over her smooth skin subsided. Her hands, that had unconsciously dug into the damp Earth, relaxed, allowing the brilliant golden spots dancing before her eyes to fade.

Waiting for all of this to pass had gotten easier each time, but it made the experience no less painful.

The trick, she had discovered, was to remain conscious long enough for it to leave.

Several hazy moments later, her golden eyes flickered open, and across the short expanse of grass she spotted Remus' fallen form.

She smiled weakly, and stood, silently cursing the fragility of the human body. Success was sweet, but why did it have to ache so badly?

Retrieving her wand, she limped over to where Remus lay.

"Ennervate," she murmured, allowing the pre-programmed wand to do the work.

The look on his face was priceless. Only Remus could manage to look analytical right after being stunned.

"Nice one," he muttered groggily.

She shook her head, offering him a hand which he shook off, shooting her a reproachful look.

Gripping the small of his back as he sat up slowly. "I'm getting to old for this," he muttered.

"Lets hope not too old, because you still have the rest of the year with me." She allowed a rare grin to light up her features.

"And what a long year it will be."

"Any more comments like that and I'll do my best to make it seem longer."

Remus scowled. "Touché. So how long were we out?"

His question was answered by her silence.

This was the first time she had not passed out.

Hagrid's absence alone should have told him that, because on the other two occasions when she had stunned Remus, they had both lain there until Hagrid found them on one of his periodic checks.

Understanding became visible on Remus' face, and upon seeing his wolfish grin, she couldn't resist a small surge of pride.

Remus Lupin rewarded his pupil with a wide grin as he picked himself off the ground, ignoring his protesting bones.

It had been awhile since he had practiced dueling like this in a non-combat situation, and he wasn't entirely sure he missed getting stunned repeatedly.

"Think you're up for another?" he queried wearily.

Suppressing a groan, she walked back to her dueling spot in response.

It was amazing, he thought, but in so short a time, she had become comfortable, at least outwardly so, with the presence of magic. When he had first arrived she still looked surprised each time it was used in her presence, but now...

She was doing better. That was all that mattered. Particularly considering that in less than a day's time that Dumbledore was planning on throwing her in amidst students her own age.

The fact that her peers were light years ahead of her in education had mattered little. Necessity mandated it.

Kally hadn't been thrilled. She had already expressed her displeasure with the idea on more than one occasion. And truth be told, he was more than a little concerned for her housemates.

There was no telling when Kalliandra would go off, because she had to eventually.

It wasn't healthy to carry around that much guilt.

His only consolation was that they would be able to continue their lessons on the weekends. It would be a rather private arrangement, since her dorm-mates were to be kept in the dark about it.

She would have enough trouble feigning competency in her three NEWT classes, and sneaking out several times a week would just be another difficult thing for her.

But perhaps the most difficult thing for her would be keeping her inadequacies under wraps. For appearances sake she would be placed in NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts, Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology, and Astronomy so as to be with people in her year, but she would be placed in third year Ancient Runes and Remedial Potions. The DADA professor had already been instructed to send her on 'errands' whenever practical lessons were held, so that her inability to perform magic would not be called into question, so that at least was covered.

As for the other courses, Remus was being paid by Dumbledore, out of some miscellaneous school fund, to tutor her in the other subjects.

After all, there was very little magic involved in dealing with magical creatures and plants. And the memorization of the meanings of Ancient Runes and the movements of heavenly bodies had virtually no wand magic associated with it.

Watching her take her place, it dawned on him that they really might be able to pull this off.

He hoped so, for her sake. He didn't very much like the idea of something happening to her. While the concept wasn't as biting as the thought of an ill fate befalling Harry, it came oddly close.

Merlin! James and Sirius had been right. He worried like a mother.

The Marauders... The thought brought a smile to his face, for his old group of friends had left behind something that just might save him from fretting like a nervous parent.

Silverthorne let out a low, guttural grunt to express his displeasure at being tethered. The other thestrals were already following suit.

"Kalliandra can't yer do somethin' to hush them up?"

"What do I look like oh thestral tamer?" Kalliandra called, giving a final tug on Silverthorne's reign.

"Yer look like the only one within earshot that'll help me," Hagrid yelled.

Despite herself she smiled, calmly running her fingers through Silverthorne's stiff black coat.

"You know..." she whispered conspiratorially, "He might kill me if you all don't calm down a bit. And then who would give you ferrets?"

Silverthorne's white, haunting eyes stared back in consideration, before his formidable head nodded. He nudged the thestral tethered next to him, and a cacophony of grunts followed as the message was passed down the line of carriages awaiting the students' arrival.

Her widened eyes took the exchange in, in muted shock. Thestrals really were so much more intelligent than people gave them credit for.

"Now that's better!" Hagrid shouted a bit too exuberantly.

She shook her head ruefully, and with a final tug she snapped a belt into place on the thestral's harness, stepping back to view her handy work. She'd never ridden a horse in her life, but the harnesses the thestrals used were supposedly similar.

"Well," she said, to both herself and the thestral, "at least you are done now. Happy?"

Silverthorne merely blinked at her once, and she rubbed his head affectionately. "Of course you are," she murmured into his nose, the trace of a smile tugging at her mouth.

Hagrid's loud yelps of protest startled her, and both her and Silverthorne jumped slightly.

"Problems Hagrid?" she yelled, slipping the thestral a frozen cube of raw meat. His tongue positively tickled her skin, leaving a sticky red residue upon her palm.

"AH HA! There you insufferable..."

"Hagrid!" she shouted, reclaiming her hand and stalking off towards the sound of his voice, with every intention of snapping at him for yelling at any thestral that way. She couldn't help her annoyed surge though. She had never had any pets growing up, and for some odd reason she had taken a liking to the animals.

But as she rounded the carriage obscuring Hagrid from view, all reprimands vanished the second she saw his predicament.

It was Hagrid vs. Thestral. The thestral, Monster, had managed to yank his harness completely off, and was gripping the thick leather strap between his sharp teeth, extending his wings menacingly while practically hissing.

Hagrid, to his credit, was putting up quite a fight. The half giant was bounding as close as he dared get, swatting at Monster with an oversized farmers hat.

Sweet Merlin... What the hell was he doing with one of those?

"Just...give it...ere ya...brute...ox..."

His disgruntled shouting shocked her into laughter. "Hagrid stop that!"

Several nicks, bruises, bumps, and twenty minutes later found her, and a rather bedraggled Hagrid, plopped upon the dirt road leading up to the school, entirely out of breath.

It was a shame that the peaceful evening would end in less than an hour, when the Hogwarts Express arrived.

"Remind me again why I have to be sorted?" It was a rhetorical question.

Hagrid answered anyway. "Because Dumbledore thinks it'd be best for yer to be aroun' people yer own age."

She shrugged, "People my own age tend to be a bit annoying if you ask me."

Hagrid snorted derisively. "I'll not be arguin' with that there logic, but not all of 'em are so bad."

She snickered, briefly wondering how much trouble she'd get in for jinxing Hagrid's prat of a friend in his sleep. Now that would be something.

Hell, maybe if she did that then Dumbledore would banish her from whatever house she wound up in. Then she could go back to sleeping in the other hut outside. She liked it there. No one bothered her. When the nightmares came only Hagrid was near enough to hear her.

Besides, there was something both routine and reassuring about the way that every morning Silverthorne would smack open her window shutters, letting light stream in as he began grunting until she was fully awake and functioning.

She smiled whimsically, thinking of the pillow she had thrown at the thestral this morning. For a change, her aim had been dead on. Of course, Hagrid hadn't been exactly pleased when he come in to see feathers and shards of fabric all over the place. But hey, it wasn't her fault that Silverthorne thought it was a ferret and tried to rip it limb from limb. And besides, Remus had repaired it. Heck, at least Remus had found the whole situation amusing.

Speaking of which where was Remus? She hadn't seen him since this morning and he was leaving with the return of the school train that night. Plus she still wanted to know what Dumbledore and him had arranged...

"Come over ere. It's the best spot for them first years to see me." Hagrid called, ripping her from her thoughts.

She stopped pondering the mysterious whereabouts of Remus Lupin long enough to shoot an incredulous look in his direction. "Hagrid they'd have to be blind to miss you."

He shook his hairy head vigorously. "No, can't afford to have any of 'em miss me. Not one! They'll miss the sortin' if they do that."

"And what a shame that would be," she muttered.

"What was that?" Hagrid asked distractedly, leaning out over the platform's edge to peer down the tracks.

She shook her head in amusement. "Nothing at all. I was just thinking about what a terrible tragedy it would be to leave a small, naive, and unsuspecting first year stranded alone out here."

Hagrid turned around so quickly he nearly slipped and fell onto the tracks. "What are you planning?"

Her brow instantly creased in genuine confusion. "Why is it that every time I say something with even the slightest trace of sarcasm, that you think I'm planning something?"

"Because you usually are."

She spun around to see Remus standing there, briefcase in hand, and a knowing smile across his pre-maturely aged face.

"Remus! And here I thought you were trying to sneak away without saying goodbye!"

"And risk offending you?" he replied all too seriously. "Skies above no!"

Hagrid's booming laugh resounded behind her. "Lupin you're cowering to a 16 year old."

The look on Remus' face was priceless, and she lunged at him in a vain attempt to smack him.

"I resent that!" she cried out, lunging again, eyeing his quick movements. "And you're pretty quick for an old man aren't you?"

Remus had dropped his briefcase in the effort to avoid her attack. "Old? I'll have you know that I'm thirty-seven!"

Looking at his indignant face, she couldn't help it. She laughed.

This time Remus lunged at her, missing by inches as she bounced out of the way. His exuberant nature was contagious.

"Ah, spry as well?" she taunted.

Remus laughed deeply, years disappearing from his face as he smiled, shaking his head disapprovingly. "Suddenly I find myself looking forward to my break from you during the week. I'll be spared your unprovoked attacks!"

"Oh Remus, you know that hurts me. Right here," she touched her heart, doing her best to look as pathetic as possible.

"Do you honestly think I'm so old to fall for that?" he asked.

"In a word..."

"Never mind, don't answer that," Remus cut in. "And besides, I have something here that might cheer up that wounded heart of yours."

Her mischievous expression was replaced by one of puzzlement as Remus held up a small, circular, gray object. "What is it?" she asked, walking over to look at it.

"This..." he said mysteriously, "Is how you're going to contact me when I'm away." Upon saying this he snapped it open, revealing a small, round mirror on one side.

"Is that powder?" she asked, eyeing the thing that looked suspiciously like a compact.

"Right you are Miss Kaylens," he said, adopting a professor like tone. "Dumbledore's idea. One of his more ingenious ones from what he said, though somehow I doubt that." He winked, lapsing into his familiar tone again.

"Okay. So explain to me how powder is..."

"It's a two-way mirror Kally. See, anytime you want to talk to me. For any reason..." He shot her a meaningful look that she didn't miss. "Just look directly into it and say my name clearly. If I have mine..." He fished around in his robe pocket, extracting a rather large pocket watch. "Which I will always have on me thanks to Dumbledore's idea to hide it in this lovely Muggle invention..." He snapped the pocket watch open, revealing a mirror on the non-clock side as well. "And once you do that I'll answer. If I call you, yours will glow on the inside slightly, so it'll be noticeable to you but not to someone just passing a cursory glance by it."

She nodded, tacking the small compact from him. "Brilliant. How'd you think of this?"

"Actually I didn't. For Christmas in my 4th year at Hogwarts..."

"In the Cenozoic?" she inquired curiously, laughing at Remus's flustered look.

"I knew I'd regret telling you wizards had extended life spans," he groaned, ignoring her serious nod and continuing on.

"As I was saying, in my 4th year James got all of us our own two-way mirrors for Christmas. These are mine, I just had them filed down a bit and inserted into these for concealment."

"Smart move," she commented, looking into hers. "Remus Lupin the Finicky WereWolf," she stated clearly, waiting to see if it worked.

"Finicky!" Remus bristled, but not before a thin sliver of light appeared in the crevice of the closed pocket watch.

She grinned triumphantly, "Well I guess it works. Hey can I ask you something?"

"Could I stop you?"

"Probably not," she confirmed, noticing how Hagrid had moved farther down the platform to give them some privacy. She made a mental note to thank him later. "It's just that you, and Dumbledore...everyone keeps telling me how afraid everyone would be. And if that's true, well, then why aren't you?"

He paused a moment, his light brown eyes flickering up to the sky as if considering her question. She didn't need to follow his gaze to know that it rested on the quarter moon, barely visible in the dying twilight. "I think, Kalliandra, that to let one's life be even remotely governed by fear is foolish. You never fully alive when your actions are limited by that. And fear, it comes from not knowing what's truly there."

She nodded, silently agreeing with him. It was uncanny, how alike he and her father could sound.

"And perhaps...Well, I know what it's like. And I know how unfair it is." He spoke these last words bitterly, his eyes hardening in an unfocused glare at the moon. And it was only then that she understood why Dumbledore had chosen him as her mentor.

He was as hated by the world as she was.

An hour later found her standing, smushed up next to Hagrid, as the mass of students pushed, shoved, and in truth, barreled their way over the platform towards the carriages that she and Hagrid had

readied for their journey to Hogwarts. Why students needed the carriages in the first place was beyond her. The walk wasn't exactly lengthy. No, she figured Dumbledore had arranged them because if he didn't, the ingrates would wonder off ungratefully, never getting to school at all.

In fact, that didn't entirely sound like a bad idea... But right then she spied the imbecile that she least wanted to see, making his way with the carrot top through the crowd towards them.

Carrot top waved vigorously, "Hey Hagrid. It's so good to see you!"

"And so hard to miss," she muttered, suppressing a laugh at the cold look Hagrid shot her.

"I see the past week has done nothing to improve your manners."

She turned, eyeing the guy's messy black hair and green eyes, which were presently narrowed and shining determinedly. Her first encounter with him had been far from pleasant, and judging from his greeting, it seemed the feeling had been mutual. "Nor yours. I still don't know your name."

The guy's jaw nearly dropped, but Ron interjected for him. "Well we were introduced. It's not his fault you don't remember."

She shrugged carelessly. It wasn't like she cared what his name was, she just wanted to put a name with his eavesdropping face. "My apologies. Not all of us are as good with names as you apparently are. But by all means don't re-introduce me, I just thought it might be nice to refer to him as something other than the nosy prat Potter."

"What!?" Both of the guys exclaimed. Hagrid, however, shot her a murderous look that stopped her smirk dead in its tracks.

Seeing that his glare had the intended effect on her, Hagrid stepped in, attempting to diffuse the situation further.

"That's enough all three of ya. Now again, this here be Kalliandra Kaylens, and that there be Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter."

She cocked her head to the side, wondering if the carrot top knew how easily his last name could be distorted to Weasel. She suppressed the sudden urge to ask just that, instead turning to Hagrid with a forced smile. "Thank you Hagrid. It's nice to know that some of us are polite."

"I hope you weren't referring to yourself as well," Potter stated pointedly.

"Why no, unlike you I harbor no delusions about my impoliteness." She nearly laughed out loud at the livid expression that crossed the guy's face. "Now if you excuse me I do think Hagrid has better things to do than listen to his friends fight."

"Friends!? Hagrid would never be friends with someone like you!" The weasel shot out, Potter smirking amusedly. Her mouth opened in angry protest, but Hagrid's booming voice cut them both off.

"Ronald Weasley how dare ye make assumptions 'bout me!" Hagrid boomed, making all three of them jump.

She glanced up, seeing his face redder than it had been after their row about her Knockturn Alley mis-adventure. She really would not want to be the weasel right now...

"Kalliandra is my friend, and you'd do yer best to stay out of her business. The both of ya!" He said angrily, his loud voice drawing the stares of several students sandwiched around them. "If I hear anythin' 'bout either one of ya nosin' aroun' in her business again..." He stopped, seemingly too angry to continue.

Hagrid drew in a deep, shaky breath, looking very close to exploding. "Now apologize to her Ron. And I mean now!"

Ron looked at her, his jaw agape, while Potter looked surprisingly abashed.

Despite herself, a sudden stab of guilt overcame her. Perhaps she was taking her hostile facade a bit too far.

"Don't worry about it," She spoke up quietly, avoiding the stares of Potter and Weasley. "I was just as rude anyhow. I'll see you later okay?"

She didn't wait for Hagrid's response as she spun on her heel, carefully making her way through the crowd to find an empty carriage. If she were lucky, then maybe Silverthorne had been particularly clever and scared everyone else away from his.

Harry stood there, half angry, half shocked at the sudden change in Kalliandra's demeanor. He hardly heard Hagrid still going off at them, considering that he was still staring after her.

That changed pretty quick though, because when Hermione Granger is mad about something, she makes it better known than Hagrid.

And Hermione Granger unfortunately thought they had pigeon holed the girl.

And Hermione Granger had overheard his and Ron's exchange with her.

Add in that she had seen Hagrid's explosion, and Kalliandra's sudden mood swing to normalcy, and he and Ron certainly did look like the bad guys.

Which was exactly how he found himself, amidst a crowd of onlookers, staring down a thin brunette, receiving the brunt of her fury.

"Harry I can't believe you! I'd expect behavior like that from Ron but you?" Hermione yelled, her voice shaking with angry disbelief.

"Hey!" Ron protested, clearly offended.

"Ronald if you know what's good for you you'll keep your mouth shut," Hermione snapped in a very McGonagall like tone.

Unlike Ron, Harry had no ulterior motive for keeping Hermione happy with him besides their friendship. So at that exact instant he didn't

much care if Hermione was annoyed with him or not. She hadn't seen and heard everything, and if she had she would have realized how deceptive Kalliandra really was. Which was probably why he suddenly found himself taking a step forward to go after that insufferable head of golden hair, with every intention of giving her a piece of his mind, rather than paying attention to Hermione's verbal berating.

Too bad a rather large hand on the back of his robes stopped him from progressing any further forward.

"You better be going to apologize Harry," Hagrid said menacingly.

He shot an incredulous look up at his friend. "Hagrid you've got to be kidding me! She insulted you! She..."

"She did no so thing Harry. And you'd do yer best to stay outta her business and life if yer understand me."

"Hagrid what are you deaf?! She did to insult you!" Ron twirped, for a change not cowering under Hermione's fierce glare.

"Oh really, an' how so?" Hagrid asked, still looking between him and Ron as if he couldn't believe what was before his eyes.

"She was making fun of you because you're a giant!" Ron shot out indignantly.

"No she weren't Ronald Weasley. We were jokin' earlier 'bout the best spot for the fers years to see me. If that's what you be referrin' to."

"But what about' Knockturn Alley?" He chimed in, coming to Ron's defense. "There's something suspicious about that Hagrid!"

Hagrid opened his mouth, but it was Hermione who answered. "I can't believe you two! You both know that Hagrid frequents that area of..." She paused, looking as if she were saying this against her better nature.

"Commerce," She finally ground out. "Frankly it sounds like she was annoyed that you had eavsdropped while talking to someone she knew. If the same had happened to me I'd probably be just as annoyed."

Harry stared at her contorted features in shock. Talking to someone she knew was certainly not all she had been doing. Hermione hadn't overheard the conversation he had.

"Hermione, you don't know what your talking about. You should have heard her..."

"Overhear!? What'd ya overhear?" Hagrid shot out suddenly, his voice low, a quiet note of panic in it.

He wrinkled his brow confused. "Well nothing that made sense but..."

"Then you best be keepin' that stuff that didn't be making no sense to yerself. Yer hear me?" Hagrid muttered, shaking his head. "I'm so disappointed in you two I don't know...Yer know I need to get the first yers. You lot get off to the castle, and so help me if any one of yer bothers her..."

The glare he shot them was more than enough to convince Harry. The last thing he needed was to be fed to Grawp.

Then again, feeding Kalliandra to Grawp could solve the whole problem...

"Harry! Come on!" Hermione hissed, grabbing him roughly by the arm to drag him to the nearest carriage. Most of the others were already rolling up towards the castle.

"So help me you two! I've never seen such rudeness..."

He knew better than to interrupt her at this point. After all, this was Hermione, and any argument with her was a losing battle. He had just managed to regain control of his tongue, which was threatening to snap at her for the reprimand worthy of a toddler that he was

receiving, when he stepped into the last carriage, and suddenly re-lost control of it.

"I'm walking," He stated bluntly, turning to do just that.

"Harry you will do no such thing," Hermione grunted, grabbing his arm with surprising strength for a girl her size. He glanced down at the painful grip she had on him, and pondered how angry she would be if he broke free.

Before he had time to decide she had already drug him into the carriage behind her.

"Hermione..." He protested, refusing to sit as he stood, hunched over in the low compartment.

"Nice to know I'm not the only one displeased with this," Kalliandra muttered from the far side of the carriage, right as one of the thestrals let out an odd sounding grunt.

She then muttered something beneath her breath. Something that sounded strangely like, "Even the thestrals think you're a prat."

"I'm a what?" He hissed dangerously.

Her eyes darted up quickly, looking almost abashed. Her voice, however, was filled with disdain.

"Hearing things, Potter?"

He felt as if he had just been slapped, so contradictory were the emotions her face and voice conveyed. Shaking his head, he shoved the sudden hesitation to argue aside.

"I don't generally make a habit out of hearing things," He finally ground out, taking a seat next to Ron grudgingly.

She inclined an eyebrow disbelievingly. "Sure you don't," She responded, not bothering to mask her sarcasm.

He practically growled, knowing full well what she was referring to.

"You're having a really hard time letting that go, aren't you?" He spat out scathingly.

"I'll let it go when I get an apology."

He visibly bristled. "For what!?"

Kalliandra's expression instantly soured. "For eavesdropping on me, that's what."

He suppressed the sudden urge to shove her out of the carriage. In fact, the only thing stopping him was the fact that he'd have to reach over Hermione to accomplish it.

"Well forgive me," He hissed acidly. "Next time I see you wandering down an alley full of dark wizards I'll just leave you to them. I didn't realize how well acquainted you already were with..."

"So your name's Kalliandra?" Hermione cut in.

Harry gaped at her.

Hermione ignored this, apparently intent on starting a civil conversation.

Kalliandra just looked at her oddly, before nodding slightly.

"Yes," She replied evenly, turning to look out the window.

Hermione's brow creased, her lips forming into a determined frown at the girl's apparent lack of interest.

Harry smirked, leaned back, and crossed his arms, preparing for the show.

"Well Kalliandra, how was your last week of summer?" Hermione pressed.

"Rigorous."

Hermione shot him a look, to which he smirked like a jackal. Ron was far less subtle, and simply mouthed, So what now, genius?

Hermione's face hardened into one of grim determination.

"So what classes are you taking?"

The girl heaved a large sigh. "Too many."

Hermione's mouth opened, as if appalled at the girl's lack of interest in schooling. And just as Harry began an internal victory jig, flashing a celebratory smirk at Ron, the girl surprised them.

"One of them is Ancient Runes. I haven't had that before so I'm going to be getting tutoring for it." Kalliandra paused, sounding uncertain. "At least, that's what the Headmaster mentioned."

Hermione's agape mouth slowly closed, a slow smile creeping across her face.

Flashing them a smug look, she started talking. "Ancient Runes is actually pretty fascinating. It's a lot like learning to read another language. In fact, it's my favorite subject."

At this proclamation Kaylens actually looked thoughtful. "I think mine will be Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid's been showing me a lot of the animals he works with over the past few weeks. The thestrals are my favorite so far..."

"Thestrals?" Ron snorted derisively, earning a reproving look from Hermione. "What are you, a sadist?"

Hermione's mouth opened in protest, apparently too shocked for words as her inevitable retort failed to come forth.

Kalliandra's expression immediately grew stony. "Perhaps you should learn a thing or two about them before you start flinging insults."

"And how exactly did I insult them?" Ron asked shortly.

Kaylens was now looking at Ron as if he had sprouted antlers. "Generally when one implies that you have to be a sadist in order to like something, I'm pretty sure that's derogatory to the something in question."

Ron waved a hand dismissively. "As if thestrals would care."

"You'd be surprised. They hate being insulted."

"That's Hippogriffs you idiot."

Hermione made a choking noise.

"No, it's Hippogriffs that react violently," Kalliandra said placidly, flipping the lid of a compact shut. "Though I wouldn't put it past a thestral to do so."

"Thestrals are not violent," Harry cut in with annoyance. "Why in the hell did Hermione have to pick this carriage..."

He gazed longingly out the open door hatch. He knew perfectly well that if he got out and walked, that he would miss the sorting, and he had already learned the hard way what happened to people when they walked into that late.

Too bad. The ride up to Hogwarts was usually so enjoyable. "So who on Earth taught you that rubbish?"

"Hagrid," She hissed dangerously.

"Screw this," Ron suddenly announced. "I refuse to remain in the carriage with her."

He stood, only for Hermione to yank him down. Ron opened his mouth, an angry protest already forming, when Kaylens cut him off.

"Do you honestly think that I'm any happier about being stuck here with you and your eavesdropping friend?"

"Just. Let. It. Go." Harry growled, hating the disappointed look Hermione shot him each time the incident was brought up.

She glared at him. "Gladly."

"Fine."

"Fine!"

Right then the carriage moved with a mighty lurch, and not another word was spoken by any of the carriage's inhabitants.

Harry stared out the window, contemplating. No one would get as angry as Kaylens had over the incident. Not if it had just been a conversation about something trivial...

What was she hiding?

Not soon enough for his liking, the convoy came to a halt outside the castle's enormous entrance. And without a word, he and Ron jumped out, dry dirt stirring around their footprints as they met the crowd of students rushing to the Great Hall.

"Well, that certainly could have gone better," Hermione stated, rueful gaze following her two friends out the carriage door.

Letting out a tense breath she had not even realized she was holding, Kally felt herself nodding in assent. "No kidding," she remarked dryly. Still, she couldn't help but feel a tiny, justified surge of indignation. That girl's friends had jumped into the carriage right as she had been trying to contact Remus.

Being in the magical world, knowing next to nothing about it, had felt overwhelming before. But now, on her way to being surrounded by competent witches and wizards twenty four - seven, that overwhelming feeling was beginning to erupt into something far closer to panic.

She wasn't sure she could pull this off. She wasn't sure at all.

Hermione released an exhausted sounding huff, breaking her from her thoughts. "Please know, I'm not trying to criticize you," she said carefully, "but you could have made things a little easier. Particularly since this whole misunderstanding seems to be over something extremely trivial."

Rising from her seat and stepping out of the carriage, her feet sinking into the loose dirt, Kally heard herself saying very quietly, "You might be right."

And even though she was not looking at Hermione, she could practically feel the eye rolling going on behind her.

Silently they joined the throng of students making their way up the castle's entrance. That was until Hermione began asking questions again.

"Do you know if you are being sorted with the rest of the first years?"

Nearly tripping over a kid small enough to have been a first year, Kally nodded mechanically. "Unfortunately."

A pensive frown crossed the brunette's face. "You don't sound excited."

Throwing a wayward glance the girl's way, Kally asked, "Would you be? I'm going to stick out."

Mounting the entryway stairs simultaneously, she saw the corner of Hermione's mouth crook up in her peripheral vision, as if hiding silent amusement. "You are twice their height, so I suppose that is an accurate assessment."

Instead of responding, Kally began grumbling something indecipherable under her breath.

Hermione responded by allowing what may have been a smile to cross her features. "They really are nice if you give them the chance."

Somehow she felt severely doubtful about that, but something of her thoughts must have shown on her features, because Hermione was interjecting before she could even formulate a response.

"We didn't get along at first either," Hermione said, their feet reaching the top. "To be blunt, it took a troll trying to take my head off for us to begin getting along."

Kally stumbled, her hazel eyes darting over to the girl with something akin to horror dancing with them. "What?"

Now there was no mistaking it. Hermione really did look amused. The girl smiled at her, chuckling slightly. "Like I said, give them a chance."

She couldn't help it. Despite all her efforts to the contrary, a strangled choking sound emerged from her throat.

Hermione simply grinned harder, shaking her head. "Honestly," she laughed, glancing around the rapidly emptying entry hall, "do you want me to wait with you until the first years get here so you're not..."

"Ms. Kaylens is quite capable of waiting alone Ms. Granger. And if you delay any longer it will be 20 points from Gryffindor."

The voice had come from directly behind them, the forcefulness of it muted by the echoing of excited chatter from students trying to cram through the Great Hall's looming doorways.

Instantly Kalliandra recognized it. She had met the man on a few occasions, and he had seized the chance to remind her how absolutely impossible it would be for her to ever gain competency in Potions.

As such, she stopped immediately, spinning on her heel. Hermione simply quirked an eyebrow before continuing off to join the rest of the students.

Snape's dark eyes lowered, eyeing her appraisingly. "I trust you are remembering discretion. Particularly where students like Ms. Granger are concerned. Some tend to be too nosy for their own good."

Heaving a sigh, Kally nodded. "I'll remember."

He glowered at her for another second, before nodding curtly. "Remember, I'll be seeing you in detention all this week."

She heaved another sigh. Upon their initial meeting she had had the unfortunate luck to inadvertently insult the man, by mentioning that he looked like one of the creatures of the night from her Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook they had given her to read. And considering that Hagrid was a giant, another species mentioned in the book, she hadn't thought it too unreasonable to assume that a vampire could be teaching at Hogwarts as well.

Unfortunately Snape hadn't taken her question lightly, and had immediately began ranting and raving about how he most certainly did not harbor a deep-seeded blood lust for the living.

And for some unfortunate, and suicidal reason, she had found his anger ridiculously funny.

Which probably explained why she had wound up in detention.

"Ms. Kaylens?"

"I'll be looking forward to it," She replied quickly, finding herself suddenly surrounded by several dozen kids, all twittering loudly with no signs of stopping.

She groaned, barely hearing Professor McGonagall's speech. Somehow she found herself following the Deputy Mistress through freshly polished oak doors into the Great Hall.

The eyes of every first year immediately turned upwards, to the left, to the right, and in every other plausible direction, unable to resist taking in their new surroundings.

The pressure of a hundred pairs of eyes burrowed into her, and she stared pointedly forward, looking over the crowd of midgets to where Hagrid sat, flashing a warm smile in her direction.

Maybe he can help me escape afterwards, she thought hopefully, coming to a halt at the front of the enormous room. Several of the midgets around her tensed up, scattered whispering passing through the crowd about fighting a troll...

What on Earth is that about, she wondered curiously, spotting the hat Remus had told her about.

McGonagall turned to face the entire room.

"When I call your name, step forward, place the hat upon your head, and the sorting will begin."

With that, she sat the hat upon a battered old stool, the sorting hat's brim opened wide, and the singing began.

"Slytherin..."

"Ron if you say that one more time..."

"Hermione you saw how vile she was!"

"She is not vile!" Hermione hissed back dangerously, being careful to keep her voice lowered. "Nervous, yes. Vile, no."

"You cannot tell me that there is not something inherently sinister about her," Ron challenged. "Something's not right there. She's going to wind up an evil Slytherin, probably waiting to..."

Before Ron could embark further along his psychological road trip, Hermione cut him off tiredly. "Just because someone is in Slytherin does not make them inherently evil, Ronald."

"Hermione how can you say that!" He bristled, clearly having trouble keeping his voice down as the first years and the subject of their argument walked past.

Hermione's face visibly tensed, and Harry could tell she didn't fully believe what she was saying. "You can't pigeon hole an entire house. Besides, Slytherins are goal oriented and strong willed. They might be a bit abrasive, but it's because they won't let anything get in their way of getting what they want."

"Which makes you a slimy git like Snape!" Ron exclaimed triumphantly.

At least Ron's exclamations were hushed enough so no one not in the near vicinity could hear, Harry thought, suppressing a groan. He should have known the peace between those two couldn't last longer than the train ride there. It was astonishing enough that they hadn't killed each other in their compartment as it was. Had he really expected that peace to last?

"Mione..."

"Ronald..."

"Will you two knock it off! The hats about to sing and I actually want to hear what it says." Ginny cut in. Harry made a mental note to thank her for distracting their disputing friends later, and quickly turned his attention to the hat. He had always enjoyed the sorting, but after last year...Well, knowing that the hat was sworn to forewarn the students and teachers of danger made him a bit more attentive this year.

The hat had opened its brim wide.

Divided, but once united,
That's how our story begins,
Four houses founded by four friends
Yet I fear that such division shall bring about our end.

In ancient times the best of friends
Came knocking on the door,

Of Ravenclaw and Slytherin,
Then Hufflepuff went to Gryffindor.

Lets build a school of learning,
For all those of magic to attend,
Yet somehow the approached three could not agree,
On what qualities to defend.

Lets teach only those of wit and learning,
Possessing the most ready minds of all.
Those had been the poignant words,
Of once fair Ravenclaw.

Proud Slytherin prized ambition,
Possessing purity of blood and cunning,
His pupils would stop at nothing,
Until they got what they saw fit to their coming.

And then were the bravest,
Those brash with noble daring,
Bold Gryffindor chose them,
As most worthy of magical learning.

Hufflepuff loved her friends,
And accepted them as they were.
She let them each create a house,
In which their prized were taught and nurtured.

And as for sweet Hufflepuff,
She agreed to take the rest,
Yet somehow division did not set well,
Unity to her, seemed best.

So when the founders sewed me,
And left me on my stool,
She stole me in the dead of night,
And bestowed me with a tool,
Of knowing when the time was right,
For the sorting ritual to end.
She said one day division may cause strife,

And she feared for the magical world.
For all her life,
She had feared the division in sight,
But never more,
Than when the friendships failed,
Of the Founding Four.

Slytherin was the first to leave,
Purity of blood his choice,
I'm disgraced by teaching Muggle borns!
He yelled, conviction in his voice.

Next left bold Gryffindor,
He felt the calling of adventure,
Rather than the desperate plea,
Of failing loyalties in need of suture.

Last left once-fair Ravenclaw,
Who once prized justice and learning,
She left because she said,
That teaching the other pupils had got too boring.

And alone stood sweet Hufflepuff,
The wisest of them all,
Because she never would heed,
Alluring temptations call.

I see the wisdom of her choice,
Why she chose to accept them all,
And now understand,
That it's fruitless to divide you at all.

Harry stared at the stool, trying vainly to process what he had just heard. At least he had been right in thinking it was important to pay attention this year, because apparently that was the last song the sorting hat would ever sing.

He cast a cursory glance towards Hermione, sitting next to him on the bench, but her brown eyes were wide and fixated up front. He could just imagine what was going through her head right then, because

chances were she was going through each page of Hogwarts a History, trying to find any other incident even remotely like this one. He had a sneaking suspicion that she had the whole book committed to memory.

The unnatural silence filled the Great Hall like a thick fog, so thick he could almost feel it closing around him.

McGonagall seemed caught between slapping the hat and looking to Dumbledore for instructions, and her hand moved cautiously towards the hat's brim, only for it to quickly recoil as if the hat had grown fangs. This odd, twitching motion was punctuated by sharp turns of her head as she looked right at Dumbledore, who to Harry's surprise, looking genuinely amused.

Snape on the other hand looked quite inconvenienced, his mouth had puckered so tightly that his lips seemed more translucent than Nearly Headless Nick's.

Apparently, they had not been expecting this.

Snape however, didn't seem to want to accept it, and he had already stood and started storming from his place at the teacher's table, clearly headed for the sorting hat's stool itself.

"Excuse me Minerva." Snape muttered, his low tone clearly audible in the unearthly silence. His long fingers snatched the hat up and onto his head in a single fluid motion, his face contorted in concentration as if conducting some clever argument.

Clever argument from Snape? No...Impossible, he thought, watching his Potions teacher with interest for the first time in five years.

Apparently he was right about Snape's inability to conduct an effective argument, because a moment later Snape had flung the hat back onto its stool, muttering about how it was a dirty, trash-ridden piece of fading fabric destined for a Muggle garbage dump.

It was a mark of how serious the situation was, that not a soul at the Gryffindor table laughed.

Harry couldn't help but notice how Snape was testingly running his fingers through his greasy black hair, looking at his hands after each swipe, as if searching for proof of something.

Every Gryffindor had a sneaking suspicion that the hat had just called him a greasy slime ball.

Ron Weasley was just the first to say it.

"Chalk one up for the sorting hat for insulting Snape!" Ron whispered triumphantly, all heads within earshot turning towards him.

Apparently that was the signal everyone had been waiting for, because suddenly a frenzy of activity broke out at the Gryffindor table, and a chain reaction of noise spread until the noise level was almost deafening. The unsorted first years looked positively terrified, as if frightened of being sent home if unsortable, and they alone seemed the only ones still rendered speechless.

"I mean did I just hear that right?" Ron asked, eyes alight with excitement he did not share.

Harry just nodded, watching the Professor's re-group.

Professor Flitwick slid from his seat, and every so often Harry could catch a glimpse of the top of his head over the teacher's table, as the small man jumped up and down, vying for Dumbledore's attention.

"Oh my God did the sorting hat just quit?" Squealed Parvati. One would think she had just realized what had happened.

"Brilliant that one..." Ron muttered sarcastically.

"Think it has anything to do with the war going on?" Seamus asked excitedly. "Don't you remember? How it warned us last year?"

"It didn't warn us that it might go on strike Ireland man!"

"Who you calling Ireland man?"

"Chill Seamus, Dean's just kidding, aren't you Dean?" Ginny's calm voice somehow filtered through the ruckus.

"I can't believe this! Never, in all of Hogwarts a History did it ever report the Sorting Hat doing anything even remotely close to this..." Hermione was in her element, and he silently congratulated himself on how well he knew his friend. "I mean don't you think Harry? This is monumental!"

But Hermione was too worked up to notice whether he responded or not, and she was so engrossed in her dictation to hear what he heard.

"Do you think we should just try sorting them anyway, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked, casting an almost pleading glance at the group of first years, who seemed to shrink away from her gaze.

Professor Dumbledore, looking vaguely amused, patted Professor Flitwick on the head as he mulled this over. For his part the Charm's Professor stopped bouncing around like a firefly on speed, and his small head disappeared beneath the staff table.

"We'll be needing a volunteer though..." McGonagall stated rhetorically, scanning the list of student names with an uncharacteristic look of uncertainty.

His Head of House was too preoccupied, and she missed what he did not fail to notice.

A certain golden haired girl had overheard the Professor's question, and after casting a glance at the distraught children around her, had woven her way through the cowering first years. She now stood besides the stool, her delicate hand grasping the top of the hat as she lifted it from its chair, plopping it upon her head. The teachers around her were completely oblivious to her actions.

Her soft, angular features relaxed, as if immersed in quiet conversation. And as she sat there, immersed in a silent conversation to which only she was privy to, Dumbledore pointed a wand to his throat, muttering, "Sonorous".

A second later the Headmaster's magically amplified voice echoed throughout the Great Hall, as it had on only one other occasion.

"SIIIIILLLEEEENNCCCE!"

Every person who had been excitedly talking, including several of the nervous looking first years, who had started to cry, stopped and turned their attention to the front of the hall.

So of course, that was when everyone's attention suddenly became drawn to the rather ordinary girl, standing by the stool, the offending hat placed atop her head.

"Apparently the sorting hat has decided that it is no longer able to, in good conscious, function as a house sorter. However, we shall have this sorted out." Dumbledore winked, the pun on words sounding almost natural coming from him. Yet Harry just stared in fascination at Kaylens, who seemed to be nodding quietly to herself. "Now I would like the upper years to remain here for dinner, and I would like the first years to come with..."

Dumbledore stopped mid-sentence, apparently just catching sight of Kaylens, even though she had been right in front of him all along.

Kaylens nodded one last time, her hazel eyes flickering open as she removed the hat, placing it back upon the stool. All eyes were upon the hat except his, so he was the only one to see the rare smile cross her features as the sorting hat opened its brim for the second time that night.

"Let the sorting now begin."

"We cannot banish dangers, but we can banish fears."

David Sarnoff

Chapter 7 Conflicting and Changing Impressions

The words echoed through her mind.

Helga would be proud...

The founding four were meaningless, ancient entities to her. She had tried reading *Hogwarts: A History*, but had grown bored, her attention lapsing by page 9. A fourth of the students in the Great Hall would have given anything for it, but the approval of Helga Hufflepuff meant little to her. She hadn't done it for any particular reason, and she was entirely against being sorted to begin with, but somehow McGonagall's question coupled with the display of sobbing first years had moved her.

Children did not deserve to start their education like that, and somehow she had found herself quietly volunteering for McGonagall, with the hat atop her head, bantering with an invisible entity that, quite frankly, infuriated her.

Yet somehow she found herself smiling, repeating the phrase to herself, as the sorting hat's brim silently opened behind her.

"Let the sorting now begin."

A pronounced silence filled the room, the heat of a thousand eyes upon her, as the students, teachers, and pitiful first years scrutinized her every step. She ignored them, wishing she had possessed the good sense to have left matters alone.

Great way to keep a low profile, she thought sardonically, knowing she'd be hearing from Dumbledore. She could just hear the lecture she was bound to receive.

Don't draw attention to yourself.

Don't talk about your past.

Don't get up and do outrageous things in front of hundreds of people...

Hell, every conversation with that eccentric man had turned into a damn near lecture, and if he argued with her about this...

She caught a surprising glimpse of Dumbledore's expression right then...

And he didn't look angry, but quite to the contrary...

He was smiling.

She stopped in front of the pacified first years, quite shocked, for at the moment the Headmaster did not look like he was preparing a reprimand.

Even if he did though, it would have been worth it. After all, how many people got to banter with a hat with an attitude?

She wondered if it had actually told Snape what it thought...

Slimy git...Subjecting me to his unwashed head a second time... Grease will be coming off on the heads of the newly sorted for years...

She nearly chuckled, remembering the hat's rant. How funny was that? Even the inanimate hat wanted nothing to do with that arrogant professor.

She locked eyes with Hagrid, forcing her features impassive. The last thing she needed was for him to notice how pleased she was. So she stood there, looking at Hagrid, ignoring the other Professor's startled gazes.

Thank God her back was to the student body. She was having enough trouble holding up under the stares of fewer than 20 adults. How would she have managed facing several hundred of her undoubtedly gossipy peers?

In her peripheral vision she noticed McGonagall move slightly, picking up a piece of paper with shaking hands. Odd, she thought. She had met McGonagall before, and that woman was the most formidable, yet fair, person she had ever met. And her hands were shaking?

Kally sighed. She wasn't sure how much more of this odd behavior she could take. What was the world coming to? First her being the creature she was... Living one life only to find out she belonged in a cage... A werewolf tutor, an eccentric headmaster, an arrogant potions master, and now a frazzled looking McGonagall?

"Ma...Malachi Artholomew..." McGonagall's voice rang out, pulling her from her slightly unnerved thoughts.

A tall, confident looking first year with sandy blond hair stepped forward, walking determinedly as he approached the stool. McGonagall placed the unruly, oversized hat atop his head, and just as it slipped all the way down, covering his eyes completely, its brim opened up, shouting, "May Malachi be accepted by all houses as their equal! For he belongs in HUFFLEPUFF! "

It was as if the room were a living entity of its own, not filled with hundreds of individual people, but instead a single, fluid like serpent. Every part of it stirring as one, hiss like whispers emitting from its throat, scattered applause erupting as it rattled its tail.

Interesting... That sorting hat was one determined little...

"SLYTHERIN! The brother house of Gryffindor! May you find your most loyal friends there!"

She was jerked from her thoughts as blatant cries of protest thundered out at the second sorting's pronouncement.

The poor, newly sorted Slytherin, looked positively terrified.

Dumbledore stood and held an ancient, wrinkled hand aloof. The student body fell silent at the quiet power he projected, and a weary smile crossed the Headmaster's features.

Kalliandra placidly observed as a young brunette hurried to the Gryffindor table, grinning proudly from ear to ear, unaware as the Headmaster studied her.

Hazel eyes glinted mischievously, betraying her secret to him as a raven haired student thrust the hat off angrily, throwing a disappointed glance at the Slytherins while moving towards the Ravenclaws.

Dumbledore had never been more proud of a student, as he was right then. And when Kally finally noticed his gaze, a small inclination of his head showed his approval.

She however stared stoidly forward.

He was not fooled...

"Kalliandra Kaylens!"

She stepped forward, ignoring the suddent feeling that her mind had been invaded...

She sat down, and stared into a crowd of expectant, curious eyes.

All things considered, when the hat did not find it's way atop her head, the staring increased. Suddenly she felt rather grumpy. She glanced sideways at McGonagall, to find the deputy headmistress smiling kindly, extending the frayed hat to her.

She shot McGonagall a quizzical look, accepting the hat cautiously. Was that what McGonagall had been waiting for? Odd... The woman had just placed the hat directly on everyone else.

She felt the ancient fabric, held so carefully between her fingers slip away, and she placed the hat, for the second time, upon her own crown of hair.

Apprehension flooded within her, for she was the only one with any conception of what she was getting into.

The other first years were just clueless pawns in the hat's risk filled gamble. One she had carelessly admitted to liking.

Helga would be proud indeed.

Ah you again. The voice filled her mind.

She cringed. The voice was unnatural, and she didn't like it at all. Not even the second time.

You are rather untrusting aren't you? Of course anyone in your place would be as well, considering recent events...

Something inside her cringed, not wanting to think on the inanimate hat's words.

But it had already moved on anyway.

Lets see...Hufflepuff? Tempting. You never would have belonged there though. You are not nearly loyal enough. Of course, neither would you have in Slytherin because of your blood.

Great. Now it sounded as if she were infected with something.

The hat laughed. Oh stifle, you know exactly what I mean. Yet your attributes are so close to a Slytherins. Almost dead on. Utilizing your resources to achieve your goals, never giving up at any cost...

She practically trembled. Getting put there, into a house with what Hagrid had called a 'Muggleborn prejudice,' would make things even harder for her. If they hated Muggleborns, what on earth would they think of her? She was even lower than that.

A shame, really. You'd fit in so well in Slytherin. But you are correct in thinking that the repercussions of discovery would be even worse there. In fact, discovery would be more likely.

Her fist clenched and unclenched nervously.

Fortunately you stand up for what you believe in. I sense a stubborn streak, and a brave, yet cunning persona. Yes, you are almost an even cross, so you'd do well in either house, yet your Slytherin qualities... You could show the Gryffindors the benefits of those... You could form friendships with Slytherins easily...

She nearly laughed at the thought. Forging friendships was the last thing on her to do list at the moment.

It shouldn't be. So many children have been forced to grow up far too fast. You as well, but in many ways you are so naive...

Anger flared up in her, and she threw a fierce thought at the hat: Have you been doing this debate and discourse with everyone?

Almost. But lets not prolong this any longer shall we? I think I'll place you in...

"Gryffindor!"

Her eyes flew open, and for a fleeting second, right before McGonagall removed the hat, a fleeting thought echoed through her mind.

Your true house...

It was a mark of how shocked he was, that he didn't even groan about her being sorted into his house.

The applause around him annoyed him, clearly showing how pleased his housemates were to have the girl negotiator amongst them.

Harry hated to admit it, but he wanted to know exactly what she had said to it that changed its mind.

Hermione's triumphant exclamation suddenly reminded him that he was supposed to be hating the girl, and the fact that she was now

waving for Kaylens to assume a seat next to her gave him the sudden desire to kick something.

Ron looked dumbfounded as Hermione turned to him, wearing an 'I told you so' expression.

"Care to take back any previous statements of yours Ronald?" She asked pointedly.

Ron continued gaping until Harry kicked his shin under the table.

Ron's features contorted in pain. "Ow... And yes! I mean no..."

Hermione scowled, turning as Kaylens arrived, glancing around almost cautiously before taking the seat next to her.

Hermione's head was already bobbing as she entered into her reception speech. "Welcome to Gryffindor! Myself and Ronald are your years house prefects..."

"Oh joy," Ron groaned, slumping forward onto his arms, affording Harry a proper view of the proceedings.

What he saw sent a ripple of curiosity through him, for the look crossing Kaylens features was almost...vulnerable.

Her features were woven into a look of apprehension, yet relief mingled upon her face as well. And as Hermione spoke, she remained quiet, fiddling idly with an empty goblet. Across the table Dean began miming Hermione, and Kaylens' golden colored eyes flickered up enough to catch his roommates less-than-subtle gesticulations.

A small smile softened her high, angular cheekbones, part of her lip disappearing as she clamped down on it in seeming humor.

For some unexplicable reason, Harry felt startled, as if he were seeing a different side to the horrible persona she had thus far been displaying. In the carriage he had hardly looked at her, but now her

rather plain features seemed somehow emphasized by the matching coloration of her eyes and hair. It was strange...

"Harry? HARRY!"

His eyes jerked away, only to find Ron gawking at him.

"Please tell me you weren't..."

"I wasn't," he supplied quickly, wishing Hermione had not insisted they sit at the end of the table. Just because her and Ron were prefects didn't automatically make them the welcome committee did it?

Ron leaned over to him as Melanie Clearwater was sorted into Ravenclaw. "So what do you think she told it?"

"Hell if I know. Why don't you ask her."

But the appalled look on Ron's face clearly stated that he'd rather Ginny date Malfoy, than ask Kaylens anything.

"Think she threatened it?"

Harry suppressed a laugh, "With what?"

Ron's freckled nose wrinkled in thought. "She could...she could disassemble it..."

"And get past all those preservation spells the founders put on it?" he pointed out. "I think not."

Ron looked clearly perplexed. "Well she had to of told it something!"

"Oh brilliant Ron. You know sometimes I'm amazed were from the same family. Honestly..." Ginny cut in from her spot just to Harry's left. "You two ought to leave her alone for that. Whatever she did, she did us all a favor. Otherwise we'd all be stuck here hungry and the first years wouldn't have anywhere to sleep tonight."

Ron's eyes widened defensively. "And you think Dumbledore wouldn't have been able to straighten it out?"

"Well Snape couldn't," Ginny pointed out, clapping as a boy was sorted into Gryffindor.

"Snape's an idiot!" Ron protested, leaning around him.

"Dumbledore doesn't think so," she whispered lowly. "Just because he's biased and gives you low marks doesn't make him incompetent Ronald."

"Ginny I..."

"Haven't we had enough bickering for one night?" he cut in, sick of the Weasley siblings arguing around him. "Because if you haven't can I just switch seats with you Ron rather than have my ears blown out from both sides?"

Ginny snickered and turned back to Seamus, her latest boyfriend. Apparently Dean and her hadn't lasted a month.

Much to Ron's pleasure.

Unfortunately Dean had promptly set her up with his best mate, Seamus.

Much to Ron's displeasure.

In truth he found the whole topic of who Ginny was dating rather amusing. The reactions her non-chalant comments elicited from Ron were positively priceless.

He shook his head in silent amusement, fixating his attention back on the sorting ceremony, right as a dark skinned boy was placed into 'Hufflepuff, the most well-rounded house of all'.

"What on Earth did you say to that hat Kally?" Neville asked curiously.

The uneasy sensation churning in her stomach only grew at those words. In truth, she had been nervously fidgeting with her goblet since she had sat down, wondering when they'd ask that question and how she ought to respond.

Allowing her eyes to hover over the expectant expressions around her, she silently took in the faces of Hermione, two nameless first years, and the one's she had been introduced to as Neville and Dean.

Dean suddenly winked at her, and her nervousness evaporated, an amused tone tinging her words.

"Well," she began, "I may have mentioned that not sorting us was causing dinner to be delayed, so if it felt that its fabric was strong enough to withstand a hoard of hungry students' wrath, than by all means, continue delaying."

Dean laughed loudly while Neville, Hermione, and the two first years stared at her skeptically.

She chuckled nervously, turning to stare pointedly at the ongoing ceremony.

"Oh come off it, we know you didn't tell it that!" Came a rather obnoxious voice to her right.

There was simply no mistaking that voice. It was far too loud.

"Would it be too much to ask," she asked quietly, not even turning to look at Weasley, "for you to leave me alone?"

Fortunately she had been barely audible, but Dean apparently had become skilled in the fine art of reading lips.

The dark skinned guy cocked his head to the side, delivering a questioning look her way. "Getting alone with the red heads, are we?" he asked, quirked a lopsided grin.

Ron muttered something else, prompting Hermione to spin in place to hiss at him.

For some reason she found herself doing her best to not listen in on the conversation. Dean, however, arched his eyebrow expectantly.

"So," he hissed, leaning across the table in conspiratorial fashion, "what did you really say?"

She eyed him for a brief moment, trying to read his expression over the empty plates and platters on the table, before responding. "Nothing really," she finally related. "I overheard Professor McGonagall saying she needed a student to volunteer to try and be sorted, and seeing as how I was the oldest..." She trailed off, shrugging. "It didn't seem right to have an 11 year old kid get up there as the guinea pig."

Besides her she saw the side of Hermione's face take on a look of sudden understanding.

"Ah, so you felt bad for the little tikes," Dean assessed.

"That's one way of putting it."

"Hrm..." Dean mused. "So where did you say you were from, Kalliandra?"

"I didn't," She stated as Emma Madalyias became the next Hufflepuff.

Dean's mouth turn upwards into a lopsided grin. "It was a polite way of asking where you are from."

Nowhere... She thought sadly. "England."

Dean leaned further forward, nearly knocking a pitcher of a strange orange-brown juice over. "Evasive?" he questioned, seemingly oblivious to his near mishap.

Nodding slightly, she answered, "Very."

"A particular reason?"

"Many," she replied. For some reason, Dean's hapless banter intrigued her.

Feigning contemplation, he began drumming his fingers thoughtfully along the table. "So...are there any safe questions to ask you."

She bit her lip, suppressing a small smile. "A few," she admitted.

"Care to share or shall I just guess until I get one you will answer?"

"I'll answer all of them. Whether I'll answer vaguely or not is the question," she countered.

"So you intend to be difficult then?" He observed, smile growing.

"If you wish."

Dean stopped for a moment, cracking his knuckles as if pondering his next plan of attack. "Well Kalliandra..."

"It's Kally," she corrected. "Hardly anyone calls me that."

His mouth formed an O of victory. "Freely given information? A bit out of character for you isn't it?"

A breath of laughter escaped her lips. "How would you know?" she pointed out. "You did just meet me."

At some point Hermione had begun listening in, and the half-confused, half-reproachful expression stretching across the girl's face was becoming rather comedic.

"Touché," Dean complimented. "So questions of location are obviously out of the question. Care to freely divulge anything else?"

Her eyes flickered towards the sorting. "Just that if dinner doesn't start soon that I might be having another conversation with that hat concerning expedience."

A loud, boisterous laugh broke from Dean's throat, but it faded into the background for her. For right then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of green one's, hidden beneath a cloud of messy hair, studying her.

And somehow that worried her more than Dean's endless questions.

Because somehow she did not think that Potter would be as accepting of her evasiveness.

Potter's eyes suddenly turned to hers, and his hard, malachite gaze swirled with something both critical and challengingly.

She broke her gaze away, right as Dumbledore stood, indicating that the sorting was done.

And at that moment Kally was very glad that the man commanded such attention, otherwise she would have been left in a staring contest that she could not win.

But as dinner commenced she failed to notice that his eyes never did entirely leave her.

Less than an hour later Kalliandra found herself amongst the throng of students, waiting to be led into Gryffindor tower, and it was taking all her efforts to suppress her growing need to get away from everyone. She was sick of the looks she was getting, of the whispers that followed her, but most of all she was sick of the questions people were asking her. Just general questions about where she was from... Things you would ask any stranger...

Only she couldn't answer them.

This was only one night she was dealing with.

How was she supposed to last the entire week?

Her only respite from it was the fact that Hermione, Neville, Dean, and two people named Ginny and Seamus, had all gotten so engrossed into conversations with each other, conversations that she was unable to follow, that they had all but forgotten her.

Thank God for that.

She stood on her tiptoes, peering over the heads in front of her. What could possibly be so important about a painting of what looked to be an over-inflated bad opera singer was beyond her... She felt in her pocket, feeling the reassuring comfort of cold plastic beneath her fingers. Well, at least I haven't lost it yet, she told herself, not daring to take it out then for fear it was already glowing.

"So why are we standing here?" she asked a bit incensed, aiming her question in the general direction of the group that was talking around her. She needed a distraction. Something to get her mind off of things...

"That's the Fat Lady," Hermione responded, smiling widely.

"That I can see. But why..."

"The new password is blubber worm farshnickle," came a loud voice near the front of the group. Kalliandra caught sight of the portrait swinging open to reveal a tunnel of sorts. The painting's moving had not surprised her. Not after having spent over three weeks at Hogwarts already. But the tunnel, that did.

"And that is the entrance to Gryffindor tower."

She looked at Hermione flabbergasted. "Why don't they just use doors?"

"Because every house is hidden. If they weren't than anyone from any house could find them."

"And what's the harm in..." But she was cut off as the people around her started swarming forward. All the happy, chattering people...Talking about their summers...

God she would give anything to be like that again.

"Blubbery...No... Blubber worm farts...Oh no that's not it either..." Neville muttered, effectively distracting her for the moment.

"Neville why is it that you can memorize long, complex scientific names in Herbology but can't remember our passwords?" Hermione questioned, stepping through the portrait and casually waving to the Fat Lady.

Neville shrugged. "Herbology's easy. Farshnickers..."

"Farshnickles," Dean corrected, coming up from behind her, nudging her with his arm.

She cast a rueful grin his way, listening with half an ear to Neville's continued ramblings.

"Farshnickles makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. Now plant names actually have meaning behind them!"

"So does Farshnickles. In the second Goblin war..." Hermione started.

A collective groan arose from around them.

"Hermione! Most of us dropped History of Magic for a reason," Dean said, effectively silencing her as a guilty grin crept across her face.

"I do go a bit overboard sometimes, don't I?" Hermione mused aloud.

And at that precise moment several different voices chorused, "Yes!"

Hermione looked rather sheepish, but Kalliandra's attention was already on the seventh year prefects who were explaining sleeping arrangements, all the while remembering a room with sea green walls...

"Kally you're in our dorm," Hermione informed as if reading her thoughts. "It's the third room on the left hand side. The girls are to the

right but I'll show you there later. All the upper years usually stay down here for awhile."

But Kally was already on her way there. She wanted to get away from them. They were happy. Almost too happy, and being around them...

Joy was something gone from her life, and being around them, listening to talk of family...

The past was not a place she wanted to remember.

She felt confined, a slight panicky feel rising in her chest as the other Gryffindors chatted animatedly around her.

All wanted was to escape, but she was locked inside this cage of a tower.

She did the only thing she could think of. She pushed past the others, mounting the stairs two at a time in a hurry to their dormitory.

She needed to speak to Remus, and with the inquisitioners standing nearby there was too much risk of arousing curiosity.

Best to just let them think I'm rude. She preferred being alone.

All other thoughts vanished from her mind when she reached their mercifully empty dormitory. She pulled out the compact, a smile crossed her features as she snapped it open.

It had been glowing.

"Hello Remus."

Harry yawned loudly, tossing for the final time. He had no clue how long he had been trying to fall asleep, but his attempts were evading him ruthlessly.

Forget it, he thought, sitting up quietly and slipping on his shoes. He had been so exhausted that he hadn't even bothered to change earlier, merely opting to forego the usual first night back celebrations for a full night of sleep instead.

Too bad that hadn't worked.

He never slept longer than a few hours anymore. And when he actually did he always woke up the exact same way. Heart racing, sheets clinging to his sweat soaked body, scar burning... He had thought the grief and guilt were enough to bear... He thought he was done with the mind games...

He should have known better. Voldemort hadn't finished his fun with him yet. Hell...Voldemort would never be finished until one of them lay dead and lifeless...

And he had a very good idea of which one it was going to be.

He eased the door quietly shut behind him. No point in waking Ron and the others just because his dreams haunted him, subconsciously keeping him from the little sleep he was allowed. Guilt ebbed at the edge of his consciousness, for in a way...

He never wanted to sleep again.

Sleeping brought dreams. Dreams brought memories. Painful ones he wished to forget. And sometimes new one's he didn't wish to see...

Reliving Sirius' death...The countless unrecognizable faces of Muggles and wizards dying...Each time in Voldemort's shoes...As if he were the one wielding the wand...As if the unforgivable words were pouring from his own lips, the green light spilling from his own wand...

Such nights never made for refreshing mornings.

He tried clearing his mind each night, and that pathetic attempt only seemed to be working half the time now.

So why even bother?

His protesting muscles, deprived of desperately needed rest protested as he descended the stairs into the common room. He knew why he bothered. He needed sleep to live for one...

And to compound matters he was resuming Occlumency lessons the next evening. Only this time it would be with the Headmaster himself, and the last thing he needed was to be lectured about sleep deprivation.

He carefully treaded his way across the floor, making his way in the dim light offered by the dying fire, allowing his legs to give as he collapsed onto the soft cushions, sinking into the back of the soft couch. It's red fabric gleamed as if on fire, and he stared into the hearth, watching orange embers rise into the air, only to cascade back down into the licking flames reaching out so desperately for them. He felt fine every day, but at night...

"Couldn't sleep Potter?"

It was a mark of how exhausted he was that he didn't jump in startlement. His eyes drifted down to the source of her voice, finding her sprawled out on the hearth rug in front of the fire, a Muggle novel in hand. How he had managed to miss her he did not know. His lack of sleep must be affecting his attentiveness, and the realization only served to make him more irritable.

"What are you doing down here?" He asked harshly.

She arched a delicate eyebrow at him, her slender neck exposed, her hair cascading over one shoulder as she looked at him in seeming amusement. "What does it look like I'm doing Potter?" Kaylens said, a hint of sarcasm in her voice as she indicated her book.

He shrugged non-committally, leaning forward onto his knees. He didn't really care what she was doing, it was just nice to have someone to take out his frustration on. He knew it wasn't right, but that didn't change the fact that doing so felt good.

"So what's troubling you?" Her voice broke into his thoughts, racking his already aching head.

"Besides you?"

"Besides the obvious." She had already turned back to her book, turning a light-weight page that fluttered slightly in some unseen breeze.

"Nothing I would talk to you about."

She vaguely nodded, remaining propped up on her elbows, lying on her stomach, her long legs stretched out behind her, giving no other indication that she had heard him. He then noticed a metallic glint upon her face that he had not seen before.

"You have glasses?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

"Oh is that what these are?" she replied, feigning curiosity as she took them off, examining them with contrived interest. "I was wondering what they were doing there..."

"It was just a question," he muttered defensively.

"A dumb one at that," she replied bluntly, replacing the small frames onto the bridge of her nose.

"Well I hadn't seen you wear them before."

"Probably because you've never seen me read before," she commented.

"Why are you like this?" he asked suddenly. He wasn't glad for the argument, but he was glad for the distraction it provided. And right now, for the life of him he couldn't fathom why Hagrid had been so defensive of someone so volatile.

"Besides your lovely presence?" she asked sweetly, flipping another page.

"Are you even reading that?" he asked dubiously. She was turning the pages awfully quick.

"I've read this book three times. I'm just skimming over the boring parts. If you read you'd know people do that."

"I read!" he bristled a bit too loudly.

"Well by all means Potter, if you want to proclaim your literacy to the whole House then perhaps it can wait till morning? Not everyone here is a night owl."

"Speaking of night owls what are you doing up?" He had glanced at the clock to see it read a quarter past 3.

"I could ask the same of you, but it's pretty obvious."

"Am I that transparent?" he asked scathingly.

"Yes. Judging from your frustrated demeanor and the stomping you did on your way down those steps there, I think it's safe to say something's bothering you. At least it distracted you to the point that you failed to notice another person lying right in front of you when you first came down."

"Maybe I just chose to ignore you," he muttered, a bit miffed.

"No. You nearly jumped when I spoke Potter. You should work on lying. Your not very good at it."

He groaned, "We could talk ourselves in circles all night like this." This was not the relaxing he had had in mind when he has left the dorm...

"Well then perhaps you should stop talking. The room would be much more pleasant if you did."

He stared at her in unabashed disbelief, shadows from the flickering flames playing across her calm profile. "You're the one who started talking to me you know."

"Well unlike you I didn't want to accidentally risk seeing or hearing something that was none of my business."

"You're really incapable of dropping things aren't you?"

"Better than being incapable of an apology."

"I tried..."

"Half-heartedly," she interrupted.

"Well you never gave me a chance to finish!"

"Aren't we supposed to be dropping this?"

His jaw flapped but no words came out. He was speechless. How had she managed to talk him around to the point that not dropping it had become his fault? So he did the only thing he could think of. He got up to leave. Better to lie awake miserable in his bed than to be subjected to her banter.

"Oh and one more thing Potter." Her voice stopped him less than a pace from the couch and he sighed tiredly, turning to see what else she could possibly want.

She was standing now, her slim figure silhouetted by the light of the hearth, her golden hair cascading around her shoulders, seeming ablaze in the fire's dying orange glow. She reached up, removing her glasses, the movement revealing several inches of exposed flesh as her night shirt slipped from her shoulder, her golden eyes surveying him expectantly.

Right then he couldn't have responded even had he wanted to. She stood there in the dying fire light, shadows playing across the floor around her bare feet, a slight smile tracing its way across her features.

He swallowed hard, his previous irritation replaced by nervousness as he willed his eyes to actually blink.

Her voice came out softer, less abrasive now that the sarcasm had vanished. "Can you talk to that Weasley friend of yours? I'm not entirely fond of him but Hermione was pretty upset after dinner tonight, when she came up to the dorm room. Apparently they were bickering, and I can only imagine about what." At this she grinned knowingly.

"However I don't want to be the cause of a fight between them merely because he thinks I'm Slytherin bait. Unfortunately his opinion means a lot to her, so perhaps you could smack some sense into him?"

He nodded, dumbfounded that she not only knew about that, but at her second sign of seeming amusement in one night.

And for the second time that night he found himself ripping his eyes away from her smiling form.

"The defense of others is far more noble than the defense of oneself."
A. K. Lovell

Chapter 8 Unapologetic

"

Chapter 8 Unapologetic

"Gods..." She murmured quietly, stretching her long legs across the pressed sheets, her toes inching out from beneath the warm comforter. She rolled over, burying her face in the familiar feather pillow as she stifled a rather loud yawn, ignoring the little man who seemed to take such vindictive pleasure in the pounding of his little hammer against the inside of her skull.

It's too early for this, Kalliandra thought dimly as she lay there, soaking up the kind of pleasure that only a bed could offer one functioning on less than three hours of sleep. She turned yet again, staring at the crimson red draperies framing her bed. No light filtered through at this early hour, further reminding her that any sane person would be sleeping still.

Just like my roommates, she thought, quietly sitting up. There was no point in trying to bully her mind into sleep once again. Hell, she was lucky she had slept dreamlessly, let alone at all.

Only one more day, she told herself, thanking God it was Thursday. The first three days had passed quickly, uneventfully, and in truth, boringly. Somehow magic wasn't amusing her the way Hagrid had promised it would.

The fact that she resented it probably wasn't helping matters.

She slipped past her closed draperies, stealthily opening her dresser to extract her jogging attire. She had lapsed the past few days, and was all too familiar with the repercussions of letting her endurance slip.

Of course here there wasn't a sparring instructor to kick her upside the head to remind her exactly what those repercussions were, but the principle was too firmly engrained in the fibers of her mind for her to forget that easily. Nine years of martial arts for twenty hours a week would discipline anyone that much.

But that wasn't exactly a good thing to remember. Because she missed it...She didn't miss her reasons for being forced into it, but she missed sparring with Sean, getting thrown around by Matt, the complaints of everyone as their instructor ordered them to do just one more mile for warm ups...

If she hadn't been so tired at that particular second, she might have actually been upset. Instead she felt nothing.

Absolutely nothing...

All she did feel was a growing urge to avoid physical exertion that morning. But she wasn't going to let something like that get in her way.

She distracted herself, hoping that the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor wouldn't show up again and that there would only be Snape to deal with. Thank goodness I only have those two classes this morning, she thought. After that, the rest of her day would be free.

She quickly pulled the loose black material of her running pants over her outstretched legs, pulling on warm cotton socks last as she wiggled her toes, making sure they were loose enough. She hated socks that were tight around her feet, at least when she was jogging, and her toe wiggling routine had been something Sean had always laughed about.

She snatched a hair band rather violently from her meticulously neat dresser, throwing her long hair into a loose ponytail. No more thinking. She'd just get out there, run, relax, and let her mind empty of everything. And despite what she knew about the dangers of repressing things, it still sounded like a good plan to her. She quietly tiptoed out of the dormitory, sneakers in hand. She'd put them on

after she finished stretching in the common room. No one in their right mind, besides her, would be down there that early anyways.

No one alive at least.

Coward, she chided herself. She knew exactly why she hadn't done it already. She was afraid to do it alone. It had never bothered her, jogging in silence before, but now... It would somehow always be silent, and the fact that it would be eternally like this was what got her.

And it's my fault...

She hastily shoved off the common room floor, forgetting she hadn't stretched.

Such was her need for distraction that she found herself outside in record time. She had yet to learn her way around the upper parts of the castle, yet this time there had been not one wrong turn, as if the ghosts had led her, hastening her way to the ritualistic cleansing only she understand.

No one else was visible upon the majestic grounds as she ran, her feet pounding violently against the dirt, her lungs gasping for air, her eyes searching for paths that the dim morning twilight refused to reveal. The walking trails were hidden to her. Hidden like the truth had been for 16 years. Hidden like the carefully crafted lies she was forced to weave. Hidden like the rock she found herself stumbling over, before her body crumpled into a painful wreck in the shadows of the Forbidden forest, her knees drawn to her chest as she drew in ragged breaths, begging a God she no longer believed in to offer her healing she did not deserve.

Not one tear escaped. She had too much self-restraint for that. But it wasn't enough to stem the golden flecks of light surrounding her. The one's only she could see as the dirt, resting so peacefully around her, began to vibrate ever so slightly.

It was the screech of a nearby animal that sobered her. She would not do it again. She couldn't.

Only she knew the facts. And the truth was, that she could, and probably would.

And would die because of it.

The dawn's first rays had streamed down, casting leering shadows of the trees upon the grounds, before she finally stood, brushing the dirt off her knees, ignoring the newly acquired, stinging abrasions running across her arms.

Once again she was disattached. She no longer cared.

Remus Lupin glanced at his pocket watch, seeing the large hand nearly three quarters of the way around its circular face. He had gotten so used to checking if Kally was trying to contact him, that it had become nervous habit to check the time frequently. He pondered killing his boredom by seeing what she was up to, but then realized that at half past eight she would probably be in the Great Hall stuffing her face as fast as humanly possible. Not an opportune moment to bother her for something as trifling as his boredom.

He shuffled his feet, sitting on a bench in the Muggle train station. He was scheduled to spend the next 24 hours in Dublin, meeting with a potential contact . And if all went well another Auror in Ireland's Magical Defense Department would be joining the ranks of the Order of the Phoenix. Kingsley had been the one to identify Spruner as a likely candidate. Apparently he had served on an International Prosecution Tribunal with the man during Voldemort's first reign of terror, and Dumbledore had red flagged the man after Spruner publicly denounced England's Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, for failing to take the proper precautions in preparation for Voldemort's return the previous year.

Spruner's outspokenness cost the Irishman his job, his family, and his reputation.

And boy did Bartholomew Reynolds, the Irish Minister of Magic, eat that pink slip when proof of Voldemort's return showed up right under Cornelius Fudge's nose.

Reynolds had been publicly flamed for his incompetence in supporting Fudge, and during his desperate attempt to retain his job title he had not only re-hired and promoted Spruner, but he had also attempted, in a press conference, to award Spruner a commendation for his unfailing loyalty to his nation's safety.

Spruner accepted it, spit on it, and torched it.

Remus chuckled, the pictures the Daily Prophet had borrowed from the Lucky Irish Press had been priceless. Kingsley had even saved the clippings, which were now publicly displayed in his office.

And there was not a damn thing Cornelius Fudge could do about it.

The metallic screech of breaks on steel rails sounded the arrival of his train, and he gathered his briefcase and coat together as he rose. The trip would be interesting to say the least. He had not actually ridden on a Muggle train since his early 20s, and then it had been on the run from Death Eaters with Peter and Cassilyda.

He still wondered to this day if Peter's hands bore her blood as well. But in this lifetime he supposed there were some things he would just never know.

"Your ticket sir?"

He nodded, fishing in his tattered coat pockets for the small slip of paper, placing it in the white gloved man's hands, nodding a thank you as the man checked it off, handing the stub back to him.

Unlike most purebloods Remus had no qualms with Muggle inventions. On the contrary, he found himself fascinated by them. Though, not to the extent of a certain Arthur Weasley.

The thought of Arthur cheered him up slightly. He could only imagine his reaction if he were in his place. Chances were he would probably

get kicked off for breaking into the conductor's booth to try and see how it ran without magic.

Probably why Dumbledore choose to send me instead, he mused, carefully treading his way up the three aluminum stairs and into the train. Dumbledore had insisted he travel this way to stay off Voldemort's perspective radars.

Which brought him full circle from one disturbing thought to the next.

Another spy had infiltrated the Order of the Phoenix.

The only problem was figuring out who.

Kalliandra was in a foul mood, and judging from her glare it was not difficult to figure out whom had put her in it.

Glaring in Potter and Carrot Top's general direction, she shoved past a group of students, separating herself from the trio's line of sight as she descended the staircase that would lead to the dungeons. The entire way she was silently thanking a higher power, of which one she was not too particular, that she did not have class with them at that precise moment.

The dynamic duo had spent the entire morning glaring daggers at her over breakfast. As if it were her fault they had both woken up with tiny worms sticking out from their heads, wiggling in place of hair.

She wished she could claim responsibility for that, but alas, Dean had done it.

She made a mental note to thank him later. Not only had the dark haired Gryffindor with the interest in art taken a rather gleeful delight in extracting retribution for her, without her ever having to ask, but he had also intervened last night, saving her from Hermione's interrogation.

An unsettling suspicion gnawed at her, for the Prefect's intentions were ambiguous at best. The bushy haired girl had dropped into a lounge chair across from her the previous night, to allegedly discuss her thoughts on the differences between home versus boarding school for magical education, but she hadn't missed the subtly dropped questions regarding her past.

Hermione, on the surface, appeared nice. But there was no forgetting whom the girl was truly loyal too. And unfortunately Potter and Weasley happened to be the two most offensive people she had yet encountered within the school.

It wasn't that there was something in particular wrong with them. But just the fact that Weasley seemed to fall into the roll of Gryffindor Inquisitioner whenever she was around was extremely unnerving.

That was without even mentioning Potter.

Remus, upon hearing of the tryst in Knockturn Alley, had sighed wearily, informing her to be a bit more patient with Harry, for apparently, at some point, the wizarding war had affected him, alienating him to anyone with even the slightest air of suspicion about them.

Considering all the things she was hiding, the conversations he had overheard her having, she had far more than a slight air around her. There were simply too many things she was supposed to keep hidden.

Like how she knew nothing about magic.

Hiding ignorance wasn't exactly an easy feat.

Swallowing down the uneasy feeling twisting within her, her eyes darted around the hallway, catching her bearings as she pathetically tried to navigate the halls to her next class.

Remedial Potions. The private tutoring in the subject had severely annoyed Professor Snape, but Dumbledore had been adamant that it

was, in all likelihood, one of the few subjects in which she had any hope of gaining magical proficiency within.

After all, very little wand work was required.

Consequently Snape's objections had been overruled, and she had been placed in his care for two periods every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, just before third year level Ancient Runes.

Discomfiture lodged firmly within her gut, for there was enough left of the person she had once been to feel embarrassed at being forced into classes with children three years her minors.

Necessity mandated it though, for she had not a prayer of surviving in the classes geared for her age group. She simply lacked the magical background. She lacked it all. And while the home-schooling story Dumbledore had concocted for her to feed to her peers would serve to explain her lack of proficiency and knowledge in certain subjects, it could never explain why, if handed an actual, real wand, that no sparks would emit.

Ducking beneath a misangled torch mounted to the wall, bitterness crept along her tongue. For the entire thing, her entire presence here, was nothing but a sham. A pointless sham.

Dumbledore was keeping her within the castle walls, under his steady eye, for his own reasons. Reasons that had nothing do with a genuine need for a magical education. Instead she was being kept hidden in plain sight, just like the others he had in places of safety scattered across Europe.

She had heard talk of young veelas, half-leprachauns, metamorphmagi, and vampires being removed to places where they would be hard to touch, because apparently Voldemort wanted them all.

Rare species for experimentations. That was what Dumbledore had told her. Anyone, anywhere, with even the trace of a rare bloodline or of a magical creature's presence had earned a spot on Voldemort's improvised shopping list.

She didn't know who Voldemort was. They hadn't told her anything else. And it frustrated her to no end.

A lock of hair fell suddenly loose, flitting forward to tickle her cheek. Crinkling her nose she rose a solitary hand, tucking it behind her ear, her footsteps quickening.

Golden eyes swept the hall, recognizing nothing. Somewhere, while deep and lost in her thoughts, she had taken a wrong turn, and become lost amongst the human traffic that was the Hogwarts student body.

Her footsteps quickened in response, as she attempted to find a spot to orient herself. Finally, failing miserably, she darted into a dark wall alcove, watching the humdrum of castle life sweep past. "Great," she grumbled softly, blowing yet another wispy strand of golden hair away from her nose. "Just great."

Surely Snape would have her scrubbing cauldrons for much longer than her scheduled week if she were late again. Not that there was terribly much she could do to remedy the situation.

"Hey watch it!" A girl with bouncy, strawberry blond curls shrieked, jarring her from her thoughts. She shoved a girl, who had been unlucky enough to run into her while leafing through her schedule, out of the way.

The small girl's books went flying, her papers scattering across the floor as the child tripped, nearly losing her footing as the mob of self-important students rushed by, paying no mind to the small girl, who was obviously in need of some assistance.

The blond perpetrator made a loud huffing noise, conveying her displeasure at being inconvenienced in such a manner, before she hurried forwards, purposely stepping on the girl's papers, grinding them into the ground with her chunky heels.

The small girl's eyes glistened as the blonde turned to glare. "Sorry..." She stammered, ducking down in a futile attempt to salvage

her papers before they were further trampled in the crowded hallway. The blonde tossed her hair carelessly over her shoulder, seemingly ignorant to the fact that one of the girl's books had just been kicked halfway across the hall.

And as Ms. Strawberry blonde walked by Kally couldn't help but overhear her snickered comment.

"The stupid Slytherin should be sorry. That arrogant kid was taking up the whole hall..."

Kally stood there, feeling sick as the small girl yelped. Someone had stepped on the poor child's hand, and her fingers had flown to her mouth in pain.

There was something inherently wrong with the entire situation, and it left her heart pounding.

Without thinking about it a second longer she darted out of her alcove, taking off after the girl.

"Excuse me!" She hollered, her voice reverberating off the stone walls, carrying down the dungeon corridor. Panting, Kalliandra caught up to the girl and tapped her shoulder. A second later the blonde turned around, eying her with severe distaste, as if a foul smelling stench had just crept up her nose.

"Excuse me, but I think you owe that kid an apology," Kally stated without preamble, struggling to remain outwardly calm as people continued rushing past them.

A small handful, however, remained, observing the spectacle, and the blonde's dark haired Asian friend looked rather disconcerted. Discreetly she elbowed her friend in the side. "Marietta I..."

Kally interrupted her. "Marietta is it? Well Marietta I think..."

"I heard you the first time. And to whom do you think I owe an apology?" Snapped Marietta nastily, a cold look replacing her patented snub.

Kalliandra smiled strainedly, turning to point through the half a dozen students standing to watch. Marietta's gaze followed her path until it landed on the small figure, still crouched on the ground pathetically, dodging the moving feet of those who had not stopped as she desperately struggled to reclaim her strewn belongings.

"Her," she stated simply, watching the dark haired friend's eyes suddenly widen in understanding. Apparently the girl hadn't even noticed her friend's trampling act.

While her friend was looking sympathetic, Marietta, however, was shooting her a look of pure disbelief. "Are you kidding?"

Screwing her features into something that she hoped looked determined, she shook her head no.

The blonde looked rather taken aback. "I'm not apologizing," she snapped quickly. "That brat ran into me first. And it's not my fault that the stick dropped her stuff all over the..."

"And she apologized," Kally cut in, her dislike for the blonde growing. "You however knocked her over, stepped on her papers, and then verbally insulted her. I would call that cause for an apology, wouldn't you?"

Kally scarcely recognized the words pouring out of her mouth, but indeed, they were coming from her.

Right then, as if to diffuse the tension, the Asian girl walked over, kneeling down to help the young Slytherin, and the little girl glanced up, as if only just realizing that she had become an object of interest.

A flash of nervousness crossed her tiny features, and she immediately started snatching quills up with even more haste.

Marietta peered around Kally disinterestedly. "Well, everything seems to be fine now," she said, gesturing towards them. "So if you'll excuse me I'm rather late..."

She turned, but Kalliandra side stepped, blocking her way as she spoke in cold, even measures. "Regardless, you knocked her down, so you should be helping her, not your friend. And after what you said, I would think that you would owe more than her an apology."

The girl's arm's crossed defensively, a fierce glare in her eye. "You have some nerve..."

"And so do you if you think you can get away with speaking like that." Kalliandra was uncomfortably aware of the words pouring out of her mouth, yet felt compelled to continue.

Marietta looked around huffily. "Fine, so who else do you think I should be apologizing to?"

"The whole of Slytherin house for one thing."

The girl's jaw dropped. "Slytherin! That whole house treats the rest of the school like dirt and you want me to apologize to them?"

She met her stare blankly. "That sounds about right."

"Ridiculous!" Marietta shouted, aghast as she attempted to shove her way past.

But Kally didn't budge.

"That girl is a child, and you had no right to treat her poorly just because she's from a different house."

"You're a transfer," Marietta hissed. "You wouldn't know anything about which houses are better..."

"Maybe that's a good thing," she cut in coolly. "Because I'm not the one treating some 11 year old like dirt."

For a second Marietta looked rather amused. "Stick around long enough Gryffindor," she muttered conspiratorially, "And you'll figure out that Slytherins hate everyone else. It's best to knock them down before they get a chance to do it to you."

Kally gaped, "Wha..." she stuttered, anger flaring up. "What is wrong with you? Do you get some kind of sick, sadistic pleasure from picking on kids half your size? Why is it so hard to apologize to..."

Kally trailed off and turned around, glancing at the small figure whose green and silver emblem glinted in the little light filtering down from the first floor stairwell, realizing that she needed a name.

It was easy to refer to people in third person pronouns. It kept the attacker comfortable, at ease... But if she added a name into this verbal fray it humanized the Slytherin kid now clutching a tote bag far too small for all of her belongings to fit into.

Maybe a name would get the cold hearted blonde standing in front of her to see reason.

Kalliandra addressed to the girl cautiously. "Excuse me, but I didn't catch your name."

The small child turned her gaze stoidly down at the ground and mumbled something. The black haired girl, who was still helping her gather her possessions, glanced up, shrugging under Kally's questioning gaze. She obviously didn't know either.

A loud groan sounded from behind, and she shot an annoyed glare at Marietta before walking to kneel besides the two crouching figures, addressing the smaller of the two. "I'm sorry kid, but I didn't catch that."

"Tif...Tiffany," she whispered quietly, nodding at the ground. "You d-don't have to do t-this though..." The girl's frightened brown eyes flickered around anxiously, as the black haired girl smiled warmly at her.

"You really don't have to..." Tiffany was repeating quietly.

But Kally shook her head firmly. This girl needed to learn that her behavior was unacceptable, because people like that...

She shivered, remembering how cruel children had once been to her, while she had been fighting to re-learn to use her arm.

Swallowing down the memory she focused again on the child in front of her.

"Tiffany, I want to and I should. No one has the right to treat you like that, do you understand?"

Tiffany just nodded meekly, reaffirming her belief that this girl had not belonged in Slytherin in the first place.

For a second she wondered just how hard it would be to arrange another meeting with that damn hat to ask where this kid actually belonged.

"Don't ever let anyone hurt you Tiffany, even if it's just knocking your books out of your arms. Got it?"

Tiffany nodded meekly as she stood, turning to face Marietta again, mildly surprised to see a few people observing casually.

Kally said nothing. She merely fixed Miss Strawberry Blonde with a pointed look, to which Marietta responded by turning on her heel and storming away.

Her Asian friend was still kneeling on the ground, several quills clutched in hand, looking positively appalled at her friend's behavior.

A second later the girl was up on her feet, storming off after her. However, the girl's haste was unnecessary, for several students had already stepped in front of Marietta, blocking her forward progress.

A warm feeling spread through Kally as she saw Neville standing there, blocking Marietta.

The irate girl looked, if possible, even more livid. "Would you mind?" She snapped, glowering at Neville. The Gryffindor just shook his head adamantly right as the Asian girl got there.

"Marietta, would it be so hard to just apologize to her..."

"Shut up, Cho."

Instantly the girl's dark eyes widened with hurt, her full lips narrowing.

A second later the girl had shoved past her friend and the crowd, disappearing around the hall's bend.

Kally opened her mouth, ready to start yelling, but Neville beat her to it.

"Nice going Snitch. Anyone else you feel like insulting today?"

Kalliandra felt herself frowning, the name lost on her, but the younger, pudgy boy besides Neville seemed to be having trouble suppressing his laughter.

Seeing this Marietta whorled away, her glare fixated on her, her mouth opening angrily.

"That'll be enough."

A platinum haired boy had woven his way through the still moving hoard of students, a prefect badge glinting next to his silver and green striped tie.

"Detention, Marietta."

Kally's eyes flickered between the two, watching as the Slytherin's elongated face remained unmoved, as Marietta's contorted into further disagreement.

"Come on Kally, you'll be late to class if you don't get moving."

She barely heard Neville's words, and entirely missed the disgusted glares they aimed towards the newcomer.

Instead she left Marietta to the newcomer, turning back to Tiffany, who was still looking thoroughly stunned.

"Were any of those papers that got messed up due today?" Kally asked quietly, hearing the hissing of the two's voices behind her.

"Um..." Tiffany was shakily leafing through her now mis-sorted papers, stacked atop the large pile of text books precariously balanced in her arms. "A few...It's okay though...It's not a big deal..."

"But it will be a big deal if your Professors dock points for messy work," she pointed out, noticing a rather lengthy essay with a tear down the front. "I'll tell you what, I'll go with you to your next class so I can explain why some have tears and shoe marks on them alright?"

Tiffany opened her mouth, as if to protest, but the newcomer's voice interrupted her.

"That won't be necessary. I'll see to it that nothing's docked from her."

Kalliandra turned, noticing how the hall's activity had suddenly died down, leaving it empty, with the exception of a pair of steely gray eyes focused on her.

"So Gryffindor, got a name?" he asked, stepping towards them with a neutral expression.

"Kallianda," she responded automatically.

"Got a surname to go with that?"

"Got a name at all?" she replied. "Or would you prefer I refer to you with generic terms like Slytherin or gray eyes?"

The guy smirked, as if his mouth had been caught halfway between a smile and a sneer. "Draco."

"Kaylens," she replied briskly, turning her attention back to Tiffany, yet still addressing Draco. "So how do you plan on making sure Tiffany here doesn't get points docked let alone detention for being late?"

"Let me worry about that. I'd think you'd be more concerned with getting yourself to class."

"Not really," she commented as two frazzled students rushed by, jabbering about how McGonagall was going to kill them. "It's just Snape. I don't really care if I particularly irritate him."

"Not too fond of my head of house I see," Draco stated, smirking wider.

"How come?" Tiffany piped up curiously.

Kalliandra grinned, vaguely amused. "Well, Professor Snape and I don't get on so well."

"Not surprising. My head of house is a bit of an acquired taste. I'm sure Tiffany here has figured that out already. That is your name, right kid?" Draco inquired.

Tiffany nodded, her gaze shifting to Draco as if just seeing him for the first time.

"Just wait until the House Cup race really gets going, Gryffindor," he continued with a smirk. "He'll be giving your entire house hell just for breathing too loudly."

"Sounds like fun," Kalliandra responded dryly.

Draco's smirk only grew. "Oh it will be, for me anyhow. Possibly for the kid if she has any sense of humor." He cast a semi-interested glance down. "What do you think kid, interested in seeing a Slytherin win your first year?"

Tiffany just nodded, wide eyed as if in awe of something Kalliandra was completely missing.

Kalliandra suppressed an irritated sigh. "So what class are you late for?" she asked pointedly, wanting to be rid of the kid and albino hair as quickly as possible.

"This is my free period. I was just on my way to discuss the matter of Quidditch captain with Professor Snape, when I heard the commotion you were making."

"Actually I was talking to Tiffany," she replied tersely.

"It's also funny," Draco went on as if not having heard her. "That you're headed there. I could have sworn Professor Snape had this period free."

It was more of a challenge than a statement or actual question, and Kalliandra did not fail to miss that subtle point.

"He does. Unfortunately my tutor was rather untalented in his area, so he has me taking Remedial Potions to catch me up on everything I missed. Much to his inconvenience, which he refuses to let me forget."

Draco's expression remained neutral. "Well in that case I'd hate to keep you from him any longer. Tiffany if you would tell me what class your late to?"

Tiffany shot a cautious glance in Kalliandra's direction, but she merely shrugged.

"Herbology..." Tiffany replied timidly.

"Very well then. Follow me." Draco turned on his heel, as if expecting Tiffany to follow him like some sort of lap dog.

Yet Tiffany did not take a step until Kalliandra did. Heaving a sigh Kalliandra followed suit, and instead of descending deeper into the Dungeons she began ascending towards the greenhouses.

"So Gryffindor? What should I call you? Kalliandra or Kaylens?"

"I don't particularly care," she replied as the three of them made their way up the steps to the ground floor. She knew Snape would be livid when she got back, but as annoying as she had found the twittering first years only days earlier, she felt the urge to make sure things with

Tiffany were sorted out. After all, the first year might have been on time had it not been for her public berating of blonde.

"Formal are we? Well then Kaylens, what is it? Do you not trust me to take care of this or are you a bit of a control freak?"

"A control freak."

"You don't seem controlling," Tiffany squeaked out, refusing to stray farther than a foot from her. It was endearing, but the close proximity was making it difficult for Kalliandra to avoid stepping on the girl's tiny feet.

Draco snickered, shoving open the front entrance to the castle, the bright sunlight streaming in, bathing the castle's looming foyer in yellow-orange hues. "Looks like I'll be sorting Snape out for you as well. Can't have the transfer getting detention her first week can we?"

"A little late for that considering I've had three."

Draco looked off towards their destination, his long stride carrying them quickly forwards, but his voice betrayed his amusement. "Three? Mind if I inquire as to how you managed that?"

"Not at all. In his words, he wasn't at all pleased to be mistaken for something with 'deep-seeded blood lust' of the living.' So I've been scrubbing cauldrons every night this week."

"You called him a vampitire?" Draco asked amusedly.

"He does spend a lot of time avoiding the sun."

Tiffany looked up so suddenly that she stumbled over her two feet, nearly plowing headfirst into Draco. Had it not been for Kalliandra grabbing her firmly by the arm and hauling her upright she would not have regained her balance.

Draco's platinum blonde hair ruffled slightly as he shook his head. "I'd imagine he wouldn't be too pleased with that."

"Truth hurts," she muttered, suppressing a laugh at Tiffany's ever growing horrified expression.

"Such disrespect for elders Kaylens," Draco said with mock disapproval, stopping in front of Greenhouse 3's door, beckoning for Tiffany to join him. "Wait here," he ordered, pulling a shyly waving Tiffany in behind him, and leaving Kalliandra outside with nothing to do but wait.

"Awareness of one's surroundings has saved many a man in war. Imagine what it may do in a time of peace."
A.K. Lovell

Chapter 9 The Eccentric Depths of Professor Gai

Kalliandra waited outside, muted voices reaching her ears, shadowy figures moving in symphony, as if playing a cursory roll in some sort of odd dance being performed just on the other side of the thick greenhouse glass, and a minute passed before his pointed face re-emerged.

Obviously he was as anti-social as her, for a brusque wave of his hand told her to follow.

Now, under normal circumstances she never would follow someone treating her in such a demeaning fashion, but at the moment she could really care less. Her nerves were frayed from the constant guilt that plagued her, and the bickering with Potter and Marietta this morning had not helped matters.

"So Kaylens, something vexing you or do you always wear that expression?" Malfoy drawled, yanking her from her thoughts.

"Depends on the company." She commented, ascending the stairs into the school.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Malfoy smirking. "And your present company?"

"Haven't decided yet."

He nodded as they traversed the front hall, making their way to the stairs leading to the dungeons.

"So you sorted things out with Tiffany's Professor?" She asked, instinctively wanting to know that Tiffany was in the clear.

"You mean with that lump they call a Herbology expert?" Malfoy snorted derisively.

"Accurate description..." She muttered, not bothering to hide her look of distaste. That woman was infuriatingly nice, and she didn't buy it for a second. It was hard enough being civil to the woman, with the way she was always looking down her stout nose at her, eyes welled with fear, voice strained with sympathy as she cautiously danced around her. The woman was intelligent enough to fear her and cowardly enough to show it, but worst of all, she had a compassionate streak that made Sprout prone to asking repeatedly how she was doing.

I'm walking death. How in the hell does she think I'm doing?

"Frankly I'm astounded Dumbledore hired the woman. She's not the sharpest Hufflepuff duffer and that is saying something." Bleach boy was going on.

Too right you are, she thought. Someone sharp would not fail to notice how pissed off she got when asked repetitive questions. But Sprout was masterfully oblivious.

"You still haven't answered my question." She said, their footsteps echoing in the empty corridor, the heat of flame hot on her skin as she brushed past a lit torch attached to the stone wall. It may be broad daylight, but very little light was capable of penetrating the dungeon's hall's thick walls.

Malfoy nodded as if just remembering. "Ah yes. The midget."

Funny, I think of them the same way, she thought sardonically as he went on.

"No problems there. That duffers not the hardest to convince of anything."

"Maybe you can convince her to shut up for me sometime. The woman's oblivious to how I subtly ignore her."

"That's your problem. Be blatant about it." He pointed out.

She smirked. Oh how she wished she could...

"Well I wouldn't want to piss off Master Dumbledore now would I?"
She chided.

Now it was Malfoy's turn to snort. "You actually care what that old bat thinks?"

She shook her head, her golden hair falling loosely over her shoulders. "Not particularly. It's just easier to stay on his good side."

"Understandable. Keep your minions close..."

"And your enemies closer."

He gave a nod of approval. "Good to hear you have your loyalties straight."

"What loyalties? I'm loyal to myself."

It was true. Because there was no one left to be loyal to.

And Dumbledore...

Well, he was the one who had kept that one small, life destroying fact from her. He could pretend to not possess arrogance, but what else could it be? Who was he to decide how much someone else deserved to know about their own life? Who was he to decide what information protected her and what didn't? Had he been forthcoming...

Then maybe things would have happened differently.

Maybe she would have taken her own life before she could unleash the hell that she was...

What frightened her was that he was keeping more from her, it was just a matter of finding out what before anything else could go amiss.

Malfoy pulled her back from her turbulent thoughts. "So Gryffindor, any particular reason you were defending a Slytherin?"

She let out a breath she had not known she had been holding, not bothering to glance at him as she mulled it over. "Well for starters I almost was one."

Malfoy's gray eyes flickered with curiosity. "So what? Did you ask to be put in Gryffindor?"

"Actually I asked to be put anywhere but there." She responded bitterly. Oddly enough this answer seemed to amuse him, as the closest thing she had yet seen to a smile crossed his features.

"So why Gryffindor?"

"Do you always greet new students with the third degree?" She inquired, a bit taken aback at his interest in a private conversation she had had.

"If their of interest yes."

She smirked. "So I'm of interest? Mind letting me know why?"

He shook his head, "Depends on the rest of your answers. Now are you going to continue being difficult or make this easy."

"Easy since you haven't annoyed me much yet. And to answer your question it claimed I'm an even split. To be honest I think it stuck me there out of spite."

Malfoy opened his mouth as if to respond, but was interrupted.

"Mr. Malfoy, I would hate to think Ms. Kaylens was keeping you from class?" Professor Snape commented gleefully, looking quite smug indeed.

Probably excited about the chance to give me another weeks worth of detention, she thought wryly. She'd been irking him all week, pretending to take great pleasure as she sung in her not so perfect singing voice, scrubbing out cauldrons, and as he put it, 'without magic.'

As if that were some unthinkable punishment.

HA! Without magic? Had the idiot forgotten that she'd been raised a Muggle? Hell, he was lazier than she thought if he though routine, daily cleaning was going to be torturous. If Snape wanted to piss her off, and she knew he did, he'd have to try harder than that.

She cast a sidelong glance at Malfoy, who unlike her seemed unamused at their Professor's angry expression. No...Instead he seemed totally at ease with Snape's irritation.

"Actually Professor Snape this is my free period, and we were just on our way back from escorting a first year Slytherin to class." Malfoy said casually, pausing as if he were waiting for Snape's inevitable rebuttal.

Snape glanced at him this time, an unreadable expression across his bloodless features. "And this required Ms. Kaylens assistance how?" He asked, sparring no sarcasm.

"Well as I'm sure you know Professor, it's important for the first years in our house to feel welcomed during their first week. It's the time when they will form alliances with other students and their young minds are easily impressionable. Unfortunately during this critical time someone took to bullying one of our first years." Malfoy informed, carrying with him a business-like manner as he gestured towards her.

"Kalliandra here, in an exemplary display of inter-house relations, put a stop to such abuse Professor, possibly salvaging young Tiffany's impression of other houses within the school."

"Ah...What a pity that would be." Snape muttered, his annoyance clearly rising as the chances of him disciplining her became slimmer with every word.

Malfoy went on, exuding the confidence only one used to giving orders could. "In the process, Slytherin house's honor was questioned, and Kalliandra defended it nobly and justly. Consequently the display delayed both her and Tiffany from class,

and she, not wanting them both to have detention, insisted on escorting Tiffany to her next class, so as to explain to Professor Sprout precisely why the girl was late. It's really quite refreshing to have a student like her in Gryffindor. Wouldn't you agree Professor?"

Snape looked blindsided. As if he had just been deprived of some great treat. "Of course..." He said, sounding clearly strained. "But if you don't mind, Ms. Kaylens has wasted far too enough of my valuable time, in which I could have been getting other things accomplished."

With that he turned back to her. "So you'll be working alone today and I suggest..." He lingered a moment, letting his dangerously hissed words sink in. "That you do not mess this assignment up."

She nodded quickly, doing her best to look chastised as she suppressed a grin of triumph.

"Now was there something you wanted to see me about Mr. Malfoy?" Snape asked briskly, turning with a flick of his robe, which nearly whacked her across the face, before storming back to his office.

She glared after him. "I hate that man."

Malfoy just smirked. "Don't we all. Good luck with him today. He hates being outwitted."

"Speaking of which, nice one." She commented before brushing past him and into the classroom. She heard his footsteps enter after her, and the open and shut of Snape's office door as he presumably entered. Not that she cared. She had just spotted the packet of instructions lying next to the empty cauldron, waiting for her, and it was looking rather thick.

With a loud groan she collapsed in her seat, bullying her mind into concentration as she started reading the instructions for properly brewing blood clotting formations. Why Snape kept giving her assignments for potions with medicinal applications was beyond her. Like any of these could really remedy the damage she'd inflict...

"This means war. You do know that."

Harry nodded angrily as Ron continued hissing threats out of the corner of his mouth. Fortunately Professor Flitwick was oblivious to their ongoing banter, and to the looks of derision that Ron and Hermione continually shot back and forth. He was just glad he had not made the mistake of sitting between them this time.

"I wonder if I can deduct points for this..." Ron muttered, stabbing his quill so hard that the tip broke off with a loud snap. Professor Flitwick glanced at them for a moment, while Ron quickly blotted the slung ink from his desk, yanking out a fresh piece of parchment for note taking.

"Brilliant idea Ron. Deducting points from your own house..." Hermione scoffed derisively. "What's next? Hexing yourself intentionally?"

Ron suddenly lost interest in taking notes and began cracking his knuckles, muttering something about awarding detentions. In response Hermione began hissing about abuse of Prefect powers, and had it not been for the fact that they were in the middle of Advanced Charms, Harry knew she would have spiraled out into an angry lecture. Instead she settled on tutting so frequently that he was half tempted to throw his ink bottle at her.

And she'd deserve it, he thought angrily. Defending that vermon transfer... All morning Hermione had been defending that... Too angry to even think of a word to describe Kaylens, he jabbed his own quill, leaving a rather large ink blot where the letter "R" was supposed to be.

Screw it, he thought, scratching the mistake out vigorously. He didn't much care if his notes were perfect. Just like he didn't care to listen to this lecture anymore. What was the point of Advance Charms if they spent the first quarter of the year just reviewing?

"So what do you reckon?" Ron hissed as Flitwick turned his small back towards them, writing on the chalkboard. "You agree with me right?"

"He doesn't agree with you Ron. Harry, unlike you is much more sensible." Hermione spat dangerously, drawing Dean's attention from nearby. "Kally said she didn't do it!"

He disagreed with that. In fact, he really disagreed, he thought, running a hand testingly through his messy hair, assuring himself it was still there. "Easy for you to say. Your not the one who woke up with fish bait wiggling on your head." He muttered unforgivingly.

"Well maybe you both deserved it. Yelling like that yesterday..." Hermione spat quietly, barely moving her lips as Flitwick turned back around to face the class, waving around a feather quill that had just sprouted from his wand.

"Is there a way to paralyze someone's vocal cords?" Ron muttered.

"I'm...still...here..." She hissed.

"How could I forget?" Ron snapped, earning a sharp elbow from him in the side. Too late though. Hermione had heard and was glaring at them both as if they had just personally signed a court order condemning every house elf to a concentration camp.

He'd have to talk to them both later. Preferably separately. If this was going to work they couldn't be arguing every thirty seconds.

He still was having trouble believing that they were actually going to do this. Even harder to accept was the fact that it had been her idea. Sure, Hermione had loosened up a lot over the years, but he never would have thought, that out of the three of them, that she'd be the one to promote breaking the law in such a way.

He reached into his pocket, feeling the slip of paper to re-assure himself it was still there. He couldn't afford to lose this. Not that the chances were high of anyone understanding what it meant. But just in

case, he would destroy the words that were scrawled in Hermione's meticulously neat handwriting.

But only one word really mattered.

Animagi...

Kalliandra released the pinching of crushed red chili peppers into the cauldron, the small granules falling to rest on top of the thick, slightly boiling, muddy broth's surface. She cautiously leaned forward, waving her hand over the churning mixture, wafting the rich smell towards her as she breathed in deeply. Oddly enough, it smelled how it looked. Like muddy earth on a rainy day, fresh grass, dung, dirty water, and minerals all mixed together to form the perfect smell of the outdoors.

She glanced back at the sheet of directions left by the sniveling Snape, and realized with a start that she'd have to start getting the directions beforehand. She was supposed to check for the proper scent, which she had, but how was she supposed to know what wolfs bane smelled like? Then, after checking, she was to immediately add bat dandruff.

How do bat's have dandruff, she thought, fumbling for the small bowl containing the dry, gray shavings. She dumped it in hastily, too late realizing only two pinches had been needed, not the whole supply left out for her, as the entire broth boiled over, forcing her to throw her chair back as she jumped away.

"Your incompetence is astounding." Snape's voice muttered from behind.

She bit back a nasty retort as every spot the broth had touched began to fizz, brown acrid smoke wafting upwards, obscuring her vision before Snape muttered something, clearing the air.

Kally snorted with laughter at the sight before her. The desk, part of the chair, and the floor immediately under it were now covered in a

wicked looking brown moss, with little, antenna-like, olive green shoots sticking out, wiggling like fish out of water while emitting a moist, sucking sound, reminiscent of the sound someone makes while slurping the last dregs of their soup.

A vein in Snape's forehead was positively twitching, and she would not have been surprised to see smoke coming out of his ears right then as he turned his malicious glare on her.

"Out..." He said, his voice quivering dangerously.

She did her best to look entirely innocent. "Don't you want my sample for grading Professor? Or perhaps I could write an essay on where exactly I went wrong and what I created instead?"

Snape's vein gave another prominent twitch, his eyes positively on fire as little mushrooms began sprouting up as well. "Three feet..."

She bit her lip, feigning nervousness as he went to his desk, muttering incomprehensible profanities. He violently snatched up a quill, spilling his ink jar in the process.

"Shit!" He muttered angrily, grasping his wand so hard that his knuckles turned white.

She took advantage of his distraction by snatching two sample vials, instead of one. Potter had hinted at possible retaliation this morning, and if he tried anything... Well, something like this could certainly come in useful...

She tucked her wand behind her ear as she grabbed an untouched chair, scooting it over the ever forming bog so she could step on it, in order to reach the sample that remained in her cauldron. She precariously leaned forward, using a clean part of the desk to steady herself as she ladled her sample into both vials. She capped both and slipped one into her interior robe pocket, before labeling her other for inspection by the vampire wannabe, who had, by some unfathomable stroke of luck on his part, managed to become a Professor.

Moments later she found herself in the hall, rushing through the throng of students to her Defense Against the Dark Arts class. She scoffed at the sheer idea. What was the point of her taking Defense of the Dark Arts?

Hell...I am a dark art.

Too bad I don't know what I'm doing, she thought bitterly, spotting the head of platinum blond hair coming her way.

"So Kaylens don't I get a thank you?" He demanded, more than asked.

"I suppose." She commented, suppressing a laugh at how he was puffing out his chest importantly. "I mean you did get me out of trouble today so I suppose you deserve one."

"Hey I convinced him to let you off tonight and tomorrows detentions as well Kaylens. Didn't he tell you?"

"Seriously?" She asked, half hoping he wasn't jesting.

He gave a curt nod. "Why would I make that up?"

"No idea. And he failed to mention that...The jerk probably wants me to show up anyways just to irritate me..." She said angrily.

"I'm not arguing." He replied, scowling at several students who had brushed too closely too him.

"How on Earth did you get him to let me off for that anyways?"

"Well my opinion counts for a lot with our Potions master Kaylens. It's good to stay on my good side." He said rather smugly.

"Thanks for the tip." She commented, wondering if he was really that full of self-importance or if it was meant to be amusing. "And thanks by the way."

"You know we just might be late to this next class because he kept you so long."

"What are you talking about? He claimed to be letting me out early."

"He just wanted to see you late to your next class. What is it by the way?" His gray eyes flickered across the quickly emptying hall.

"Advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Same. But..." He grabbed her elbow lightly, "Your about to pass our classroom."

She stopped, getting her bearings and quickly realized that he was right. She had nearly walked right past the open doorway. And it was no wonder, considering that the lights were off in the classroom and that no one was waiting outside, as if waiting for the Professor to arrive.

"You think it's cancelled again?" She asked, a faint feeling of apprehension creeping over her as Malfoy steered her gently towards the room.

"God I hope so..." He muttered, releasing her as they stood directly under the doorframe, peering into the darkness. "That would be nice wouldn't it?"

"Yeah..." She muttered vaguely, straining to hear any sound of life from within. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing...

Something wasn't right. She suddenly felt as if she were being watched, yet the hall behind them was empty, and the dark room before them...

Malfoy was talking again but she scarcely heard him, her eyes swept the dark before her, looking for a note proclaiming class had been cancelled.

There was none to be seen.

Malfoy touched her arm lightly, vying for attention, blissfully unaware of the war raging behind her eyes as she peered into the dark abyss that was Hogwarts. Only seconds had passed since they had come to stand there, and as quickly as it had come, the strange sensation in her very blood mutated into something else far more terrifying.

A prickling surge, like amplified static electricity, thickened the air. Her hair stood on end in that crucial moment of uncertainty.

She didn't think. She just reacted, thrusting her elbow into Malfoy's rib cage, shoving him aside as the first streak of searing red light swept between them, their faces inches from the blinding glow of the spell. Malfoy let out a grunt of surprise as she continued reacting instinctively.

She felt, more than heard, the next incantation. She threw herself forward, rolling painfully over her shoulder, somersaulting out of harms way and towards their unseen enemy, choking back the unrelenting pain of the past weeks as it shot through her. Malfoy shouted something incomprehensible.

Their attacker remained silent as Malfoy countered his curses. She couldn't just hide there. She thrust her hands to the ground, steadying herself, and shot out her leg blindly.

Her foot connected with something that gave way with a snap beneath her heel. A painful shout confirmed that it had indeed, been a person, and she felt their knee buckling beneath them as she yanked her leg back, out of the way as the person's balance betrayed them.

Her leg freed from entanglement with their attacker, she dropped exhaustedly to the cold floor, ignoring the pain shooting through her arm. Her wand was already in hand.

"Wingardian Leviosa!" The surge that shot through her left her reeling, and her eyes followed the line of the spell from her wand tip to where it connected with the man, now fully illuminated by the combination of both her levitation and Malfoy's stunning spell.

Shock hit her like a bucket of ice water. For in that brief flash of light, where the man's beaten face was illuminated, she saw not the look of vindictive fury she had expected, but a pleasantly amused expression, frozen in place from Malfoy's stunning spell.

"What the hell is going on here?" Malfoy yelled from behind her. "Lumos!" The dark area was cast into shadows as light shone from his approaching wand tip, and it was reassuring to her that he had seen the amused face as well.

Two loud cracks from besides them resulted in the simultaneous jinxing of Hannah Abot, as two stunning spells combined nailed her dead on, flinging her clear across the room where she smacked into the opposite wall with a dull thud.

She was able to see all of this because with the two loud cracks, had come light, revealing the full extent of the devastation they had reeked on the room.

A boy she knew not his name, lay face down on the floor, clearly stunned from a rebounded spell. Half a dozen desks lay upended and overturned, their classmates cowering behind them as if in fear of their lives, wide eyes peering around the edges. The far window's draperies were singed, the thick scent of smoke hung in the air as Hermione Granger continued drenching it with water spouting from the end of her wand, as if she were not completely satisfied that whatever fire they had started were out. And less than five feet from her stood the stunned faces of Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter, the only students besides Hermione and Hannah who had been brave enough to remain standing.

"Wha..." Came out her half formed question as she began to piece things together.

And then it hit her.

"Oh my God is she alright?" She shot out, starting towards Hannah, forgetting about their Professor that she still has suspended in the air. Fortunately she realized that she was the only thing levitating him

before he hit the floor head first, and she sat him upon his desk as Malfoy muttered "Ennervate" towards him, reviving him effectively.

And with the yelp of pain he let out, she almost wished he hadn't.

"Good Lord child where did you learn to do that?" The Professor yelped, his knuckles white from clutching the edges of his desk for balance.

She bit her lip hard, restraining the flow of angry words threatening to ensue. He could have at least warned them there would be a practical test to start off the term! If he had then she wouldn't have most likely destroyed several of his tendons and knee ligaments with her leg sweep!

And she wasn't the only one peeved. Malfoy's previously slicked hair hung askew, dangling in front of his eyes, his tie loosened, cheeks red, and he looked quite disheveled as he clutched a tight fist, presumably restraining the same annoyance she was trying to hold in check.

"No matter...That was a mo..OW! Ah just give me a minute..." Their Professor gasped, his brown eyes watering so vigorously that tears streamed down his young face.

"I'm sorry about that." She got out safely, restraining her anger as guilt slowly replaced it. "Is ther..."

She made to approach him, but he recoiled, waving her off. "N-no child. Things are quite fine." His speech was punctuated with periodic high octaves as he fought off sharp stabs of pain from his protesting nerves. "And I must say...I thought this would be a rather clever start of term but I see that I was..." He groaned loudly. "Rather mistaken..."

She nodded dully, turning to glance back at where Hannah still lay unconscious.

"Shouldn't we get them to the hospital wing?" Weasley asked, gesturing to the two unconscious students.

Their Professor's eyes widened as if he had been hit with a sudden epiphany. "To right you are!" He shot out, as if he had forgotten all about them. Her and Malfoy exchanged glances, both wondering how one could ignore two limp, over 5 foot bodies in one's own classroom.

"Ms. Um...You know I don't know your name, but the girl, with the dark hair, standing by the unconscious girl in the back?" He yelled out, looking expectantly past her towards Parvarti.

Her roommate stood from where she had been kneeling by Hannah, glancing towards the front with an 'I can't believe this' expression.

"Ah yes! You!" The Professor shot out cheerfully. "Be a doll and levitate her to the hospital wing for me would you?"

"And you sir!" Now he addressed Dean, who had just walked in later than even her and Malfoy. "Would you mind levitating this young man over here as well?"

Dean cast her a confused look and she shrugged, mouthing 'I'll explain later' at him. This seemed to satisfy him as he whipped out his own wand, levitating the nearly 6 foot guy out the door after Parvarti and Hannah.

"I really ought to have taken more precautions for this." The Professor muttered, looking around the room with mild objection. "Perhaps next time I'll erect a barrier around the viewing section. But I had no way of knowing how exuberant some of you would be."

Next time? She thought, slightly impressed at the willingness with which the man approached bodily harm. Too bad the guy's lower leg was hanging limply, it's swelling visible even through his loose clothing.

"Professor not to interrupt..." That was a lie, she thought. She had every intention of interrupting him before he could begin on another long spiel, which he looked very ready to do. In fact he looked downright excitable. She'd seen a lot of injuries before, but never had she seen someone smiling so jubilantly after such an injury. "But I

think you should see Madam Pomfrey as well. I felt a snap in your knee when I kicked you."

He glanced at her happily. "Oh a little physical pain will not keep us from class Ms...Ah and what is your name?"

"Kalliandra Kaylens..."

"Professor Gai at your service!" He made an ill fated attempt to sweep one arm out in a mock bow, but for his troubles nearly tumbled from his perch atop the desk. He regained his flailing composure quickly, brushing his ear length hair out of his face. "Ah well now that was very nearly embarrassing! But what was I saying?"

This guy is way too excitable for this time of day, she thought wryly, watching his eyes sweep to her. His eyes lit up again as if another light bulb has went off in that obviously rattled brain of his.

"Ah! Ms. Kaylens! That's where I was! Now class, the first rule of defense is that your level of training determines how you fight. And if I were to throw in the towel because of a measly knee injury..."

"Sir your ACL might have torn..." She started to object.

"A Cursory Ligament." He interrupted easily.

She nearly snorted with laughter at how one could so easily distort what it stood for.

"Professor I really think she's right." Hermione piped up from across the room. "You need that looked at."

"Oh Ms. Granger I have had far worse!" He chirped. "And besides! This lovely reminder of my own mortality, so kindly left for me by Ms. Kaylens, is going to teach me how to fight in a combat situation without the use of one leg!" He sounded positively delighted at the prospect as his widened eyes blinked rapidly.

Kalliandra glanced over her shoulder to gage the reactions of her fellow classmates to this character, and was greeted by a dozen open

mouthed expressions of shock. You'd think they were the ones who had been stupefied and not him, she mused silently, turning her attention back to Professor Gai, who was presently hopping on one foot towards the chalk board, cringing as he went. Hermione looked positively besides herself with worry, most likely caught between wanting to help the poor, obviously deranged man, and her paralyzing fear of correcting a teacher.

Well this, she thought, as Professor Gai leaned heavily on the chalk ledge, gesturing for them all to upright the desks, ought to be an interesting class.

"Can anyone explain to Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Kaylens why I felt it appropriate to attack them as they walked in?" Professor Gai chirped so happily, that had Harry not seen his limping gait only moments before, he might have missed the death grip that his new, and rather idiosyncratic, Professor's white knuckles had on the chalk ledge.

"Because your bloody mad..." Ron muttered beside him, while starting to up-right a desk Neville had knocked over in his scurry for shelter.

"Ah you there! The nice red headed fellow who was unfortunate enough to come in first!" Gai chirped again, spotting Ron's clean up efforts.

Ron stopped clearing the clutter long enough to mutter something about never making that mistake again, before throwing a very dangerous expression towards their awaiting Professor.

"...and that won't be necessary." Gai continued, shaking his head as he indicated the desk Ron clutched, seemingly ignorant of the way Ron was eyeing it, as if he would very much like to throw the thing. "I rather like the room like this. At the very least it will make an absolutely smashing setting for today's practical lesson don't you think?"

Ron's eyes widened in disbelief before a stony expression crossed his features. "Fine." He commented curtly, dropping the desk unceremoniously, the loud crash resonating so loudly that the dull chatter of their classmates died.

Ron took no notice. "I mean why fix things if your just going to attack us and destroy them all over again?" His carefully disguised sarcasm dripping from every word.

Harry practically tripped over a broken desk leg at this, and a soft yelp from Hermione drew his attention to realize he wasn't the only one.

Professor Gai, however, took no notice of their reactions, and was already talking rather quickly again. "Excellent attitude young lad! Your someone of my own heart I can tell! It's always great fun to break thins! Though I must admit I've never been much of a fan of putting them back together again but..."

Gai stopped mid-sentence, wincing slightly as he shifted position. He raised his bad knee high, as if preparing to kick something, only his lower leg flopped around uselessly below. He let out a long sigh before going on. "Well I should have expected that but...OH AH HA! There's the blasted ticker!"

Ticker? Harry thought, exchanging an uneasy glance with Ron as their professor stopped abruptly yet again, and began a rather comical, one legged hop towards his desk, taking care to avoid the large chunks of blown off chalkboard now littering the ground so as not to trip.

"Bloody hell he looks like a kangaroo..." Ron hissed, snickering slightly.

"It's not funny!" Hermione snapped harshly, keeping her voice low as Gai collapsed into a pathetic heap on his chair, cringing as if he had been asked to stay on the same subject for longer than a few seconds.

A moment later he had toppled sideways out of his chair and had re-emerged with an intricate, square mesh of metal wires.

"Now this here is a ticker!" He exclaimed triumphantly, shuffling it from hand to hand. "Got it from Platypusing or Bust at quite a discount, a very nice discount in fact, and I think you'll all rather enjoy it...But I'm getting off the subject!"

"Probably got off the wrong train stop too. Should've wound up in St. Mungos loony ward if you ask me..." Ron choked out.

"Well no one is asking you!" Hermione snapped.

Harry very nearly lost it at that point, and it was only a reproachful look from Hermione that prevented that.

"Ah you two! The red-head and the messy haired fellow! You two seem happy! Albeit disheveled, enough! Perhaps one of you can explain to the class..." Gai shot out his arm, and the whole class collectively cringed as he made a large sweeping motion across his desk, sending the few possessions that had remained unscathed clattering to the floor. Gai grinned satisfactorily at this before plopping the "ticker" onto the now empty surface. "I never did like a busy work area...But messy haired boy! What is your name?"

Messy haired boy? He thought, his previous amusement fading in light of the finger now pointed at him. He contented himself to crossing his arms where he stood, and muttering his surname unapologetically.

To his great relief he received no reaction. In fact, Gai seemed completely uninterested in the fact that he was Harry Potter, the boy who lived, and he continued rambling on about something or other, as if he existed in his own little world, where things like tact did not exist, before actually getting back to his original question.

"So why do you think I attacked all of you today Harry?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but was again interrupted.

"Oh and I almost forgot! If I am going to insist on calling all of you by your first names...And never fear I will learn them all even if it takes me half the year..."

At this Hermione seemed to forget herself and began to openly snort, and Harry saw why. There was just over a dozen of them, and if this man couldn't remember that many names then how in the Hades was he going to teach them?

"...well I will just absolutely insist, and will be positively adamant about it if I have to, on the point that I expect each and every single one of you to not only refer to each other by your first names, but to me as well!"

He was just starting to wonder where the man's off button was when he caught that his name was Tres, that he had French origins but had been raised in the United States and Australia, that his favorite sport was white water rafting, and that his name roughly translated to "Very Cheerful" in English. And it was about then, twenty minutes later, when he had given up hope of having a competent DADA professor that year, that the man got back to the subject.

"So again I ask the class for the second..."

"Third..." Hermione muttered, from where she still stood besides him.

"...time. Why did I attack you all today?"

At least he forgot who he asked originally, he thought, eyeing the ticker that Gai was carelessly sliding from hand to hand across the surface of his desk like a hockey puck.

"Anyone?" Professor Gai asked after a minute, looking up from his amusing game and scanning the room hopefully. Harry noticed Ron shuffling back slightly.

Can't really blame him, he thought, this wild cat was liable to start jinxing them on command.

"Come on someone..."

"Constant vigilance." Harry interrupted loudly, not wanting to listen to their parakeet or a Professor repeat his question again.

Gai flashed a smile that could mislead the devil into thinking he had won entrance to heaven, rather than a place in the lunatic's class. "And how was it that you Harry, were able to escape my attack unscathed while most of your classmates were stunned?"

He stared blankly for a moment. How was he supposed to know? Ron had walked in first and gotten stunned. That was one hell of a clue to defend yourself wasn't it?

But no, that wasn't right... Despite himself he concentrated, remembering that right before Ron was hit, how he had thrown Hermione to the ground, barely missing getting stunned themselves.

An odd prickling sensation moved down his spine, the hair on his arm standing on end as his uneasiness grew. It had to have been luck right? He opened his mouth to say something of the sort, but was cut off by Kaylens sure tones.

"He was probably aware of his surroundings and didn't walk blindly into a pitch black classroom."

He repressed the urge to kick something as both Malfoy and Gai...No Tres, smiled approvingly at her.

"Quite possibly Kalliandra. However Harry and those two standing next to him..."

"Why are we standing?"

Tres paused, glancing towards his vexed sounding interruption. "Forgive me but you are...hrm..wait it'll come to..."

"Malfoy." Malfoy supplied, cutting him off completely. "But why are you sitting while we stand? This should be the other way around considering that it's class. And if it's not a class I'll leave."

Tres's face lit up with sudden comprehension. "Oh I see! You want to sit down! Well by all means no one is stopping you! However I would strongly recommend that each and everyone of you get used to standing because that will be a major component of this class! But I'll get to that later...Where was I?"

Malfoy snorted derisively and plopped onto the ground.

This was going to be a long year, Harry thought, for the hundredth time that week.

"Ah yes! I was pointing out that Harry and his two friends there actually had walked into the room blindly. Now I will agree with you Kalliandra that this was not the most intelligent of maneuvers..."

"I never said..." Kaylens began to protest, from where she casually leaned against the chalkboard. Tres either did not hear her, or chose to ignore her as he went on.

Probably ignoring, he thought, not blaming the Professor one bit as Kaylens caught him glancing at her. He quickly narrowed his eyes, not wanting to feed the girl's already over-inflated ego. He silently marveled at how either her or Malfoy's heads had fit through the door. Sure, with Malfoy's father still in Azkaban the prat's mouth had ceased to run, but he was sure that was only temporary. And somehow he doubted that anything would squash Kaylens' vanity, considering her obsession with constantly looking at herself in that pocket sized make up mirror of hers. The night before Hermione had cajoled him and Ron into being civil enough to study with her, and somehow Hermione had annoyed Kaylens enough so she actually agreed to it. Only Kaylens had spent half her time checking to see if that make-up thing was still in her robes, rather than doing her share of the note taking for Hagrid's reading assignment.

A sharp tug on his arm re-focused his attention to Tres, and to the fact that he and Kaylens were the only ones still standing. Only she had the safety of the wall, whereas he was impeding Sarah MacGulligans view.

"Sorry..." He muttered, dropping onto the dust strewn floor between Hermione and Ron, noticing that were it not for Tres's lanky height, that their Professor would not even be visible from their seated positions.

"Well I hope none of you uh...mind if I get myself back to my..." Tres leaned back, grasping underneath himself awkwardly for his wand, which could be seen to be sticking out the rear-most pocket of his casual robes. "My lesson..."

"This should be good..." Ron muttered from besides him, prompting a sharp hiss from Hermione.

Oh fabulous, he thought. I'm between them again. He suddenly wished he had a seat to slump down in, so instead settled with willing the floor to swallow him so his friends could bicker over him rather than through him.

"Ah I almost forgot! I think that should be points..." Tres babbled on.

"What in the blimey is he talking about?" Harry muttered, leaning over to Ron so Hermione didn't catch it.

"No clue mate..." Ron muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "This is almost as bad as Trelawney."

"No ones as bad as her..."

"Thank God we don't have her this year..."

"So lets see...5 points for each student who escaped unscathed, and 5 points for each student rendered unconscious by my deflected spells...So that would be..." And much to Harry's horror Professor Gai reached out over his desk, pointed his wand towards the class, and began counting heads with the tip of it.

He was about to ask Ron what the odds of that thing accidentally going off were, but discovered that Ron had slumped so far down on the floor that he was practically lying on it. Hermione on the other hand, was sitting with her abnormally erect posture, twirling a strand

of rather wavy hair around her finger nervously, eyes wider than he had ever seen them.

"...5 points to Slytherin for Malfoy, and 5 for Kalliandra...Ah and that would be to Gryffindor..."

Ron went into a mild coughing fit, but he was pretty sure he caught the word Slytherin in there.

"And 5 for Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, and...no you were stunned..." He muttered, getting to a rather disgruntled looking Ron. A confused look flitted across their Professors face, which was growing paler by the minute. "And who were those knocked out fellows again?"

"Hannah Abot from Hufflepuff and Justin Flinch Fletchley from Hufflepuff." Ernie Macmillian informed, practically taking out his eardrum due to his position directly behind his own.

Professor Gai nodded absentmindedly and stood, flamingo hopping away from his desk towards a briefcase lying near the window. "Ah... Well another... 10 points to Hufflepuff... for being casualties... to Malfoy's misaimed spells." He dropped himself onto the window sill, his face flushed with the mild exertion as he summoned his briefcase to him. "Not that you could help it Mr. Malfoy. However, in a real battle situation I would suggest that your 'incant first and ask questions later' policy be amended to include the actual position of your attacker first..."

Even Hermione snorted at the contorted expression marring Malfoy's already pointed face. He found himself physically biting his tongue to refrain from letting out the spew of possible chides he could throw out right then.

"But the reason only Harry, Hermione, Kalliandra, and Malfoy were un-stunned was because of a combination of luck and talent. For instance, Hermione and Malfoy were both merely lucky. I would have stunned them both had Harry and Kalliandra not shoved either of them out of the way. The red-headed chap over there..."

"He has a name..." Hermione muttered through gritted teeth.

"...could have as easily been just as lucky had Harry chosen to knock him out of the way. However he chose to save the damsel in distress..."

"I am not a damsel in distress." Hermione practically growled, echoing his own thoughts.

"Yes yes dear I know." Tres said dismissively. "None of us like to be thought of that way however..."

"That's not why I knocked her down." Harry interrupted, his blood boiling slightly at how easily their Professor could so seamlessly offend everyone in the classroom.

Tres summoned the Ticker towards himself and began playing with it again, looking totally dis-interested in what he had to say. "Oh and then why did you? Perhaps you had a feeling that alerted you to the fact that you were about to be ambushed?"

"As a matter of fact I did." He said without hesitation. It wasn't something he wanted to reflect on, but that feeling of uneasiness...That had to count for something.

"And I suppose then..." Tres tossed the Ticker into the air, catching it one handed as gravity propelled its free fall. "That you also knew whom I was attacking first?"

"Actually no. To be honest I wasn't even sure. I just reacted and Hermione was the closest one to me."

"Oh and I supposed a little fairy told you to react ahead of time?"

He was starting to get truly mad now. He was being chided by his own Professor, and after last year he was in no mood to tolerate anymore disbelief on his behalf.

"Actually no. I felt uneasy, chilled, and just off. I'm not even sure why I reacted bu..." He replied, his annoyance starting to reflect in his tone.

Tres caught the Ticker one more time, a satisfied smile creeping across his eccentric face as he interrupted him, exclaiming, "I knew there was a way to get you to explain how you did that! You seemed hesitant about relaying how earlier, as if you yourself were still sorting out how you accomplished that feat..."

"It wasn't a feat!" He protested, amidst several amused chuckles.

"But ah it was. Unlike Kaylens, who read the situation before running into it..." Tres stopped, turning towards Kaylens with a large grin. "That is what you did wasn't it?"

She nodded vaguely.

"You see!" Tres shouted at the class, as if expecting them to all jump excitedly at some sudden enlightenment. "Kalliandra recognized that the situation she walked into was abnormal, and because she identified that she hesitated longer in the doorway than most! Most of you walked into the room without a moment's hesitation and muttered the Lumos spell. She however listened to common sense and was, as Harry put it before, being constantly vigilant!"

Tres swiveled on his perch to face Harry again. "Harry!"

Oh please don't bring me into this, he thought wryly.

No such luck.

"Harry you however did something different than Kalliandra. It was not your perceptive mind..."

"Which you obviously lack..." Muttered Ron sarcastically.

"But your keen sense of intuition that protected you! Now does anyone here know exactly what intuition is?"

A girl with dark, wavy ringlets, whom Harry did not know, raised her hand timidly. "It's a type of premonition..."

"Didn't we drop Divination Harry?" Ron asked quietly, followed by a prompt eye roll from Hermione.

"Very close Marie!" Tres praised, nearly dropping the Ticker as he clapped excitedly. "Both premonitions and intuition are types of foreknowledge in an individual. But a premonition is more specific, giving the individual exact details about a scenario that will unfold at an undesignated time in the future."

"Blimey did he just recite a definition..." Ron gasped mockingly. "Who would have thought he had it in him!"

Yes, Harry thought, suppressing a smirk at his friends running commentary. This class was turning out just like Divination.

"...you see, if Harry had experienced a premonition he could have visually seen what his attacker looked like, and known that I was planning on stunning them rather than killing them. However, his intuition merely told him something was amiss. So intuition is less specific than a premonition, and it is not something you should ever fully rely on because not all witches or wizards experience it. Though we will touch briefly on instances where it has come in handy in wizarding history..."

"Could of sworn we left Magical History on the third floor..." Ron choked out, his cheeks reddening with restrained laughter. Harry's teeth clamped his lip hard and he silently willed Ron to stop. His abdominal muscles were seriously starting to hurt with his own suppressed laughter, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could contain himself.

"The identification of suspicious factors is one thing we will focus on." Tres went on, smacking his fist into his hand for emphasis. "Identifying signs of danger in multiple scenarios is integral for your very survival! You need to be prepared at ALL times!"

"They should have prepared us for this..." Ron whispered. "Had I known he'd talk this much I'd have brought ear plugs."

"At all times you must assume that you can and may be attacked. We are the most vulnerable in comfortable situations, like when we are at school. But never assume that the mere presence of your teachers and peers will be enough to protect you..."

Sounds as paranoid as Moody..." Ron remarked, his amusement suddenly sounding a bit forced.

Harry just nodded, slightly sobered by how Tres' dark gaze fell right on him, as if he could see right through him... The words had struck close to home for him, and Tres knew it.

"Always being prepared..." Tres continued, breaking eye contact, deepening into a barely discernible tone that Harry found himself straining to hear. "Intuition cannot be taught. You either have it, or you do not. Even Muggles can have it, but most ignore it, not recognizing the significance of it. You cannot learn to discern a good or bad vibe from a situation, but you can learn to recognize potentially dangerous ones. For instance, did it strike anyone as odd that the classroom door was unlocked, yet empty, when our class was scheduled to be meeting here?"

A soft murmur rose through the room, and Harry realized how quiet it had suddenly gotten. The change in Tres' eccentric demeanor had affected everyone.

Tres nodded his approval, obviously aware that the class's full attention now rested with him for the first time that day. "And was it normal for a classroom's lights to be off, with no sign of any of your other classmates when you all rushed in here within minutes of being late?"

Again, a ripple of ascent swam in the small pond of ripped robes and disheveled hair that the students formed on the floor.

"You see class, that all of you noticed these very obvious signs. But only one of you identified the signs as dangerous. All of you were either too comfortable in your environment to suspect foul play, or to preoccupied to notice it. Had Marie for instance, identified these things for what they were, she may have continued down the hall

rather than walking blindly into a situation that dealt her the lower hand. Out of the 19, well 12 of you because some of you came inside in groups, only one of you recognized the signs, and only one of you had the intuition to save yourself."

All semblance of his previously jolly expression was long gone. "I don't know about you, but had my sister known that the odds of intuition saving her from the killing curse, to be only 1/12, she might have done more to learn everything she could to tip the balance in her favor." He paused, brushing his ear length hair away from his pain filled eyes, exhaling deeply before continuing. "Avoiding hostile situations is half the battle, and it is my job to teach you how to do that."

"Over the next 9 months you will learn to identify these situations, and you will learn to defend yourself against a multitude of dark creatures and wizards. You will be drilled in elementary magical healing, along with Muggle first aid in case you ever find yourself disarmed and injured. Muggle fighting techniques will occupy nearly a quarter of our time to prepare you for the possibility of being caught unarmed, and before any of you scoff..." He added, shooting a look towards Malfoy. "I should remind you that one of your classmates has already demonstrated the effectiveness of such things."

Harry's gaze traveled from Malfoy's annoyed ambiance, to Kaylens downcast eyes. And as he unwittingly studied her thin form, drawn to her as amber orbs rose, locking with his own for one fleeting moment before she turned, gazing unseeingly towards a destination only she could reach, he caught sight of a depth he had only guessed at.

Behind those eyes raged an ocean of fiery pain, crashing violently against unsure banks. All so carefully hidden beneath the calm countenance of hazel eyes, that even he had missed it...

And for the first time while looking upon her, he was overcome by neither anger nor annoyance.

No...

He was disturbed.

And as quickly as her defenses had fallen, they rose anew from the turbulent waters, blocking from him the overflowing crests that were her inner demons.

And for the first time since he had set foot on the land outside the Department of Mysteries, he realized what it was to feel true fear.

He was not the only one with a secret...

Truly great madness cannot be achieved without significant intelligence.

Henrik Tikkanen

Chapter 10 Encryption

"Good evening Remus." Dumbledore greeted as he stepped out of the fire place, never removing his eyes from the parchment he was working upon. "Or should I say afternoon? Judging by the position of the sun, which so stubbornly insists on hovering at that precise angle there..." He continued on, gesturing absentmindedly with his quill. "I would swear on my deathbed that it does that in order to maximize the amount of time it can spend blinding me with it's own dying glares each late afternoon. Spiteful little thing...Or should I say large?"

Remus smiled warmly, dusting ashes from his dingy robes as he walked towards his former Professor's desk. But then again, Dumbledore really never had stopped teaching him had he?

"But matters of that brilliant orb's incessant onslaught against my aching retina's aside. How faired Leeds?"

And so the verbal sparring begins, he thought with another weary smile, fully aware of all the simple question implied. "Our friend was excited to hear of recent news from here Albus."

Dumbledore seemed to mull that over, thoughtfully scratching several more lines onto his parchment before continuing. "So I take it he would not be entirely opposed to another visit?"

"Not at all. In fact Leeds mentioned as much. Truthfully I think our friend is rather anxious to show you his latest renovations."

At that Dumbledore glanced up, a meaningful look across his ancient features. "Ah... The young never are satisfied with the works of their elders are they?"

"Not when they have better accessibility than we do."

"Ah Remus, don't you try and group yourself into the ruddy old bat category with me now. Though if I didn't know better I'd say you were enjoying that mobility your young legs provide."

"Only as far as they carry me."

Dumbledore grinned, slapping his desk happily. "Well perhaps I may be letting these old legs carry me to Leeds sooner than I expected."

"I think our friend would enjoy that."

"Then it's settled. I'll send an owl out as soon as Miss Kaylens arrives."

Remus nodded, glancing at the pocket watch he had already fished out of his cloak pocket. No blue for a change. Of course, she was probably still punishing him for ignoring her that afternoon. Not that he had had a choice in the matter. One didn't put a meeting with Dublin's head auror on hold to speak with their 16 year old student.

Particularly if that meeting was never supposed to be happening.

Ireland's Minister of Magic had previously proven as meddlesome as Fudge in preparing for Voldemort's return, and the Order had decided that it could not risk his involvement in their activities.

Which was precisely why the Order remained a secret to both Ministries, with the exception of carefully placed agents within each, such as Arthur Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley, and now in Ireland's Magical Defense Department, Spruner.

He still felt awful about blowing Kalliandra off, but he really had had no choice. He had at least been able to talk with her during part of his journey, when he had taken the Muggle train as far North as Leeds. Voldemort's agents seemed to be making one huge mistake in their intelligence fortunately, and that was their failure to monitor Muggle methods of transportation.

Sure they were monitoring the flo network, looking out for unauthorized port keys, and detecting large leaps by apparation.

But they weren't monitoring bus and train stations, and that was precisely why Dumbledore had had him take one into Northern England, where Voldemort's forces, upon last report, were said to be less concentrated. Apparently Voldemort was attempting to concentrate his forces around Surry and London, and near Hogwarts, so there was less tracking in itself up north.

The self-belligerent idiots.

Monitoring one's apparation was a difficult task in itself, but Dumbledore had not wanted to risk the chance of his apparation to Ireland being detected. So that was why he had spent hours aboard a train, before exiting in Leeds, and apparating from that station's bathroom to an empty field in Liverpool, where he had wound up with soaking wet trousers from landing in a particularly deep puddle from recent rainfall, and then apparating again from there to the train station in Dublin.

He had then proceeded to spend the night in a rather swarthy inn that was already getting ready to close up for the winter months, before meeting with Spruner as inconspicuously as possible the next afternoon, in Dublin's Phoenix Park. Meeting in Ireland's equivalent to Central Park had been his own idea. Mainly because he was lapse to meet at a pub due to the close proximity that enemy agents could easily obtain due to the very nature of local watering holes. But in a wide open, busy park, during the Muggle lunch hour, it would be easy to slip out of ear shot while not looking suspicious.

It had worked perfectly as far as he had known. And now Spruner was on board.

The entire meeting had been a success, with the exception of one small, little, teensy, smaller than Wormtail, thing.

He had left his pocket watch out.

So when it started glowing, halfway through their lunch meeting, Spruner's curiosity had been aroused.

That had been a tough one. Answer Kally and risk both her and Spruner overhearing something they shouldn't, or ignore her and risk the small chance that she had...

He didn't even want to fathom the possible mayhem she could have caused.

As it was, he had slipped it back into his coat pocket as if nothing were amiss.

The Order couldn't afford to let someone like her know about it's undertakings. Besides, it would just put the girl more at risk than she already was, and that was one thing he did not want.

Thinking of Kally brought forth a long sigh from himself as he wondered what was keeping her. He had been late in arriving as it was. But Kally...She was usually insufferably early everywhere. Never late... He was just beginning to actually worry when Dumbledore's baritone voice intruded upon his private thoughts.

"You do realize, Remus, that you are pacing about even worse than my father did when I fought Gindelwald. Though of course, I am not entirely sure he realized that I was even gone. He had just received word on my brother's illegal goat herding so he was a bit distracted at the time by those more pressing matters..."

It was all he could do to not laugh outright, and the smile peeking around the corners of his mouth told the tale of a losing battle. It was hard enough to picture Dumbledore young, let alone young enough to have a father who would actually be concerned for his welfare.

And then there was the fact that Dumbledore had just very much reminded him of Prongs, who had accused him on more than one occasion of being the grandfather of the group. Always worrying about where the others were, when one of them ran off unexpectedly. But who could blame him with what he and Sirius were always up to!

Then there was their jesting one particular evening, when Wormtail had went missing and he had combed the Marauder's Map till day break searching for their tiny four legged friend. They had been besides themselves with amusement.

And Padfoot had said he'd eat Wormtail before he ever became the fatherly type.

If only Padfoot had been able to see himself 14 years later with Harry. He might have bit his own tail at that sight! Not to mention that now he didn't exactly mind the thought of Wormtail being subjected to Padfoot's formidable stomach. Who would?

At least his work now would make a difference in righting all of the wrongful deaths. His meeting with Spruner had gone well, and now the Order had another agent in Ireland's Magical Defense Department.

Remus sighed again, his thoughts shifting to the loud knock at Dumbledore's door, and the ensuing argument that followed as Kally and the lovely gargoyle knocker began bickering loudly.

"Ah...I can see Crustantheas is as cheerful as always about his parts being banged loudly against my office's wooden entrance." Albus said with a rather cheeky grin for someone his age.

Remus just shook his head as he opened the door, relieved to see an intact Kalliandra just outside. There was no telling what that girl might do when left to her own devices, and considering that she had her Thursday and Friday afternoon's free, she most certainly had been left to them for too long for his own liking.

"Afternoon Remus." She muttered, stalking in sulkily.

"Crustantheas giving you problems?"

"Yes! The bloody knocker tried to bite me agai..."

"And she deserved it! You know missy you can KNOCK yourself! You don't NEED to use me every bloody time..."

Remus slammed the door shut before the knocker could get in another word edgewise, asides from the indignant grunt it emitted as it was slammed a bit too hard for it's own liking.

"About time someone shut that thing up." Kalliandra proclaimed satisfactorily, eyes still narrowed in near slits.

"Yes, yes... Perhaps I will need to calm him down a bit...later." Dumbledore cut in with a wry grin.

"If all Gargoyles are that touchy I hope I never have the misfortune to meet one..." Kally muttered, still staring towards the sound of Crustantheas' disgruntled mutterings, muffled by the thick oak separating them.

"Well that is Crustantheas in fine form so I'll hope you never do encounter one like him. After all, Professor Gai has mentioned that you're a force to be reckoned with. Apparently repairing ligaments is tricky business. Took Madam Pomfrey nearly all afternoon to sort him out."

Remus glanced between the two of them knowingly, throwing a suspicious glance in Kalliandra's direction, who for her part, was doing her best to look as innocent as possible. "And what exactly did you do to him Kally?"

All pretense of innocence disappeared, a proud smirk creeping onto her young face. "Absolutely nothing that he did not already deserve."

"Define deserve." He asked, feeling the foreboding of a parent who's child had just been sent home for blowing up their school.

"A tear in his ACL for attacking us unexpected..."

"YOU WHAT?" He exclaimed, interrupting her out of shock and nearly tripping over the chair he had been trying to sit in. "When did this happen?"

"In class yesterday." She replied complacently, sliding into the chair besides him. "He failed to mention that he was planning on starting the year off with a practical examination and thought it would be fun to attack us. I just reacted." She shrugged, shooting a curious look towards him as if trying to guess how he would react next.

At this point Dumbledore was grinning rather amusedly, but he was having severe trouble shutting his agape mouth.

"Turns out Kalliandra here put on quite an exhibition of how Muggle self defense is a useful tool. In fact, Professor Gai has even requested permission to have her help with the demonstration of it when they get to that section of their curriculum later on this year."

He found himself facing Dumbledore now, still speechless as he put things together in his own mind.

"Wait? Tres wants me to what?" Kalliandra asked, surprise evident in her voice.

"Tres is it? I do suppose he was insistent about that first name business... But I would have thought he had informed you about that idea of his in class today." The headmaster replied amusedly. "As soon as he was able to put weight on that leg of his again he marched straight here to my office to ask if you and Mr. Potter could help him in separate demonstrations later on this year."

Remus turned in time to see Kally shaking her head as if astounded. "He failed to mention it..."

"Ah! Well now it has been mentioned and all parties, except for Mr. Potter, are informed, so I'll be making sure he knows about his demonstration later as well. But your Defense class is totally off the incantation for what were supposed to be discussing right now."

Remus, finally getting his voice back from the shock of finding out that Kally had abused more than herself this week, nodded assent while adding, "Which is the arrangements for your tutoring."

"And they would be?" She asked it, seemingly disinterested, but he could see she was just the opposite. She was hard to read, but after spending an entire week, nearly 24/7 with her, he had gotten quite good at it. He understood how she thought, and that was more than he could say for his understanding of his three best friends growing up. He had known them for years and he still hadn't figured out how their often deluded minds had operated. All he knew was that as soon as he got a hold of the remaining one's head, he wouldn't be too concerned about that mind remaining intact for very long.

No, on the contrary, he would very much like to smash it into tiny bits all over the floor.

"Are you familiar with what a port key is?" Dumbledore asked, rousing him from his angry thoughts of the past.

"Yeah, I read about them in some book Hermione lent me."

"Ah, befriending Miss Granger I see?"

"No. To be quite honest I took it from her to shut her up. She wouldn't stop babbling about making sure I was caught up in all of my classes since my curriculum was probably very different from Hogwarts." Kalliandra commented lightly. Her words conveyed annoyance, but not her tone, and he knew better. Kally wasn't annoyed with Hermione.

No, on the contrary, Kally probably was enjoying Hermione's company, and because of this was probably trying to psychologically distance herself from her housemate as much as possible.

He was beginning to wonder whether Albus' decision to explain her condition to her had been a good thing or not. Because if she kept up this pattern of self-induced isolation it would only quicken the process...

He flexed his hands vigorously, a nervous habit he had picked up in his childhood. The extension and retraction of his phalanges after transformations had always alleviated the pain associated with the growth of his claws. Eventually it had come to alleviate stress as well.

And now...Well now it was an effective distraction from thinking about things he would rather avoid for as long as possible.

He didn't want to think about what could happen to Kalliandra.

She was far too young to be dying.

"From my rotting body, flowers shall grow and I am in them and that is eternity."

Edvard Munch

Chapter 11 Remnants of the Past

"So let me get this straight? Every weekend I get to ditch my housemates and their pitting prattle, prance up here and take..." Kally held up the chain for effect. "This to Remus' once I'm safely shielded from the wayward eyes of my peers in the confinement of your office, show this old moon a thing or two about what happens to grumpy old geezers who try to stun teenage girls with little wooden sticks, add a few more gray hairs to that excellent collection he's been accumulating, then sneak out of here after hours and make my way undetected back to Gryffindor Tower?"

Remus smirked, the morose thoughts of earlier gone as the corners of his mouth crept up at the edges.

"That's not quite how I would have worded, taking a port key to Remus' residence each weekend to continue your study of magic, but I must admit, yours was more amusing than anything my befuddled old mind could come up with." Dumbledore replied, reflecting his own amusement.

Kally nodded, curling her legs up onto the chair comfortably, reminding him of James' similar habit whenever the Marauders were in the Headmasters office after a well placed prank.

Wait a second...

"Who are you calling an old moon!" He asked abruptly, the insult finally registering.

Kally pursed her lips, as if deeply considering her answer under the Headmaster's bemused gaze.

"Someone whom I'll most decidedly be getting a howler from next week?" She queried.

His grin was becoming decidedly more pronounced. "Well at least this grumpy old geezer's enraged tones can still elicit fear in someone."

"Only when that little twig of yours is aimed at me."

"I'll have you know..." He retaliated, waving his wand threateningly at her. "That this little twig is exactly what I am trying to teach you to use! Yet somehow I find myself developing the urge to use it on you!"

"Tempting the fates am I? You do realized that not chiding you would not only take all the fun out of life, but then who would you get a chance to bicker with?"

"Ah, there is that Remus." Dumbledore concurred, just as he opened his mouth to inform her that she was skilled enough at bickering with people and didn't need his encouragement.

"Plus.." Dumbledore continued, ignoring the exasperated expression on his face. "With her chiding remarks up, the threat of several well placed jinxes should motivate her to learn shielding charms rather quickly."

"Shielding charms?" Kally asked, amazingly deciphering that garble. "You mean there are spells that can block other spells?"

Remus just nodded, and spying the expression across her features hastily added, "Not all spells though. So don't think about provoking Mr. Potter because I can assure you he knows a good many that will go right through even the best of shielding charms."

"Well doesn't that take the fun out of life." She muttered despondently.

"Look on the bright side. There's always that mission of yours to complete my head of gray hairs." He pointed out, brushing an offending lock from his eyes. "Not that there's much challenge in that..."

A devious grin crossed her features. "Well I could change my goal to something more challenging. Like making you bald, for instance."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"While I hate to interrupt this escalating mealy..." Dumbledore cut in, reminding Remus of their purpose that afternoon. "Perhaps I should point out how Kalliandra's portkey will work."

Remus shot a glance at his pupil, now rapt with attention as the headmaster explained how the ring portkey would work, a curious crease in her brow as she took it all in.

"So I just put it on, press the stone down, and a tiny needle comes out, pricks me, and it's my blood that activates the portkey?" Kally repeated, tossing the necklace that the ring would hang on between her hands.

"Precisely. The portkey is specific for you. No one else can use it. We made it that way in case any of your dorm mates accidentally picked it up..."

"It won't be leaving my neck Professor." She cut in, switching from playful to serious in the time it took him to blink.

Dumbledore nodded, humoring her. "Of course Kalliandra. However we have to plan for the possibility."

"One last question."

"Ask away."

"It's not just concern for my dorm mates, is it?"

If Dumbledore was surprised by the abruptness of her question, it didn't show. He merely blinked under Kally's rather accusatory gaze before answering the issue she had refused to discuss until now.

"Yes and no." Dumbledore began. "We can't have anyone accidentally transporting themselves to the Lupin home."

Kally nodded curtly, making it clear she could care less about her dorm mates.

Dumbledore drew in a deep breath, softening into an almost pacifying tone. "Kalliandra... We know nothing more of the attacks than we did the night we found you."

"Have there been more?" Her voice considerably hardened.

The Headmaster sighed, removing his glasses and polishing them on the folds of his moon speckled robe, perhaps considering his phrasing.

"No. There have not." He finally replied, observing her without a trace of the apprehension Remus knew they both felt.

Kally merely blinked, repeating the outcome aloud for her own benefit. "Then it's safe to assume that it was me..."

"That they were looking for." Remus found himself supplying, hating the stoid look crossing her youthful features.

Long moments drug on, the jovial mood thickening with tension. Her calm countenance betrayed the living contradiction she embodied, as a fire of emotion stirred behind her honeyed eyes.

His previous amusement vanished, bringing back the gloomy mood of before, when he had reflected upon her most likely fate.

But somehow, as he observed her taking it all in with quiet reserve, he couldn't convince himself that the young woman beside him was dying. Because while she was in very real danger, she also had a chance.

A chance of life free from the restrictive measures of an overbearing Ministry.

A chance to live in a world free from the evils that had claimed her joy.

And a chance to reclaim the love that had once been so predominant in her young life.

A chance he would monopolize on. Because somehow he knew, they would make it work.

She might be abrasive, obstinate, and harsh, but she was also astute, resolute, and loving.

She was a fighter. That had been blatant upon their first meeting. Just after she had called Hagrid an insane lump of a man for trying to get her near a blast ended skrewt he had found roaming free in the forest.

"Remus?" Her quiet, firm voice broke through the silence. "Do you think we could leave now?"

He glanced towards Dumbledore, who was already answering.

"I think that would be wise considering the day is growing late, and young Mr. Potter will be here shortly."

Kally made a sour face, which did not last long as Dumbledore reached into his desk drawer, removing a small object that glinted in the brilliant glare of the sun still streaming through the windows.

"This..." Dumbledore commented, extending his hand. "Is your portkey."

His wrinkled fingers released it into her outstretched hand. Yet her expression remained the same, save for a fleeting flicker of recognition as her fingers clasped around it, concealing its engravings from view.

From her own view... For Remus knew she could not bear its presence.

"I thought it time for you to have this back." Dumbledore said, surveying her searchingly.

She roughly nodded, her closed fist falling to rest in her lap, her lower lip being bit down upon, her only sign of emotion as she unclasped the necklace, looping the ring through it.

Never once did she succumb to the undeniable urge she must have had to gaze upon it.

Instead, her eyes fixated in seeming boredom on Phineus, as if daring him to speak aloud once more.

Already once that afternoon, during a lull in Crusantheus' constant complaints, Phineus had outspokenly claimed her to be incurably insane.

And his adamant proclamation had been promptly met by a startled screech at the sudden greeting. Apparently she had grown accustomed to paintings moving, but had been loath to hear one talk.

Too bad, he thought. She had very nearly fallen backwards out of her chair at that, and if the already visible bruise on her forearm was any indication, she was going to be rather sore the next day.

But for now all was forgotten as he carefully did his best to avoid getting caught watching her.

Dumbledore knew best. He knew this. He knew it was unhealthy for her to block everything out of her life.

If she did that she would never heal. And as dog headed as she was, that meant it was up to him and Dumbledore to force it upon her delicately, piece by piece.

But that didn't mean he had to like it.

Kally's broke her gaze from where Phineus feigned sleep, her eyes falling slowly to rest upon the object she clutched so tightly, her thumb slipping habitually into the oversized adornment before the rest of her fingers wrapped around the black stone, pressing it down determinedly before vanishing from sight.

Now, perhaps.." Dumbledore said resolutely. "She can begin."

He merely nodded, somber tears in his gaze because no amount of prodding from him could heal her.

Her fingertips trailed across the smooth metal surface as she slid the adornment from her thumb, clasping it tightly within the confines of her palm. The familiar etchings worn from years of a child's tracing, their meaning lost in light of where Kally now lay, sprawled out, face down in a foreign foyer.

"Infinity..." She whispered, her face buried into the unfeeling floorboards, the lingering feel of the engraving fresh upon her fingertips. "Riley you promised me..."

Locks of her shimmering hair lay strewn messily about her head, blocking out the light of the dying candelabra, and for just a moment, as her shoulder seared with the pain of her unceremonious landing, the world was blocked out. She could see nothing, and in this she took comfort. There were no mirrors here, no reflections refuting the lies her life had become...

"Gods I'm sorry..." She murmured muted by her tangled mane of hair. Silence was her soul companion, for while it reigned she was truly alone, free and unheard from untrustworthy ears for however short a time she was afforded her precious solitude.

For the moment there was no one to bear witness to her private misery. Not here. Not now at least. Not like in the school dormitories where someone was always watching, waiting, as if expecting her sudden confession to fall as freely as the tears threatening the cringing corners of her eyes.

She squeezed her eyes and willed them to not fall.

She couldn't stay there, sprawled on the floor forever, however much she wanted to. She had long since ceased wishing for it to open and swallow her, shielding her from the world, and no amount of prayer

would prevent Remus from following her there. She knew this, and yet she lay there, her body shaking with the sobs she struggled to suppress.

Long moments passed before she collected herself enough to risk opening her eyes, and her gaze followed the glittering path the necklace's chain took, traversing its way across the dark cherry wood floorboards. Somehow the long dead wood had retained its scent, and the lingering musk of the forest was fresh in her nostrils as she breathed in deeply, her throat burning with the heat of her sobs, barely held in check.

Gods I'm stronger than this, she scolded, shame rippling through her. How Riley would cringe to see her like this. So broken... All from the reminder of a promise made to a little girl, which she now clutched so tightly in the palm of her hand, and his scent...

Years had passed, yet the memory of him was so strong, aroused by the familiar scent he so oft carried after spending the afternoon bathing in the light of the sun in the highest branches their backyard afforded.

She gingerly lifted herself from the ground, the only sign of her inner turmoil the constriction of her face as she shakily found her footing, glancing around the dim front foyer, taking in Remus' home for the first time.

Remus... How many times had he, Hagrid, and Dumbledore told her she needed to grieve? She was beginning to lose count...

Someone like her did not deserve such luxury.

She sighed, running her fingers through her damp, tear stained hair, as she watched shadows playing across the windowless, pictureless walls. How she longed to be like that again, carefree and unnoticed, free to do whatever she pleased. The flickering flame, eating away the last dregs of the candle's wick, danced in an unseen breeze, and she followed the orange hues cast about her down the hall.

She unclasped the necklace, draping it around her neck before letting it fall to rest, Riley's ring hidden just below her shirt.

It was odd, how her mind had worked the night she had awoken. Despite all the horrors she had discovered that night, her heart had lurched the most when she had found her neck bare...

Shows what a caring soul I am, she thought morosely. Instead of shaking the feeling off, she reveled in it, acknowledging that it was better to have painful memories, than none at all. It could be worse... She could have become this monster while still too young to recall their faces, like the way Riley had looked when he had given Sean and her his tokens...

"You know..." Remus' voice broke in, startling her out of her reverie. "If I didn't know better I'd say you looked thoughtful."

How the hell... Hastily she wiped the lingering wetness from her eyes, startled by his sudden appearance. "Remus...I didn't hear you arrive." She whispered softly, fearful of her voice failing her.

"Well not all of us crash land." He replied, devoid of any humor as he came to lean against the wall across from her, silence falling as thick as the darkness encompassing them.

Her eyes fell to the floor, the seriousness of his face not lost upon her. He was the only one to treat her like an equal, to not hide what he was feeling from her. Dumbledore, Hagrid, Sprout... Everyone else was different, with their excessively hopeful glances and plastered on grins. They treated her as if she were about to break at any moment. As if she were a carefully sculpted crystal carnation, chipped to the core...

Her eyes flickered to Remus, observing him. Remus... So kind and caring, yet astute enough to know when she needed space. He was the only one who had told her not what she wanted to hear, but what she needed to hear.

The only problem was she no longer knew the difference.

"Not much of a decorator are you?" She finally whispered, shattering the unearthly silence of the hall.

His own light brown eyes, like a young saplings bark met her gaze, the dim light reflecting from them. "Well I don't exactly entertain much now do I?"

Despite herself she smiled ever so softly at the thought. "It's no wonder you don't have a girl."

"Oh so your on about that again are you?" He teased.

She breathed in deeply, grateful for the light banter and the time it gave her to collect her thoughts. "You know I don't believe I ever let up Remus..." She said lightly, her delicate hands traversing their way to her necklace nervously.

"Are you glad to have it back?" He asked abruptly, cutting to the painful point they had been dancing around awkwardly.

"You know...I don't know whether to be angry or thank you." She said truthfully, caught somewhere in between.

"How about a little of both."

She scoffed lightly, her body language conveying indifference, only the slight twitch of her mouth betraying how dangerously close to tears she truly was.

"I'm not going to say I know how you must be feeling." Remus began hesitantly. "But your unnaturally calm Kally. It's okay to..."

"Grieve." She snapped. "Yes I know... I've only heard it half a dozen times this week alone from every professor I have. And speaking of which..." She gestured angrily to her 'portkey.' "If Dumbledores had this all along, why did he wait until now to return it? It wasn't his to take in the first place Remus! He had no right..."

"I think you know the answer to that." He interjected calmly, effectively silencing her.

She wanted to scream, to cry, to do anything other than stand there, forever cursed to appear fine with the fact that Dumbledore had kept her from seeing any of her family's heirlooms. Not one photograph... Not one tournament trophy... Not even their tombstones...

Not that she felt she deserved such pleasantries. No... Not her.

She had been forcibly held at bay from their funerals. One would expect fury for that. She had been denied the ability to cry over them, yet now they all expected her to. One would expect anger at such contradiction.

But no.

On the contrary.

She understood all of that.

What she didn't understand was why he had to spring this one relic of Riley so unexpectedly on her... The very one she had treasured since her childhood. One such as her didn't deserve to have something so pure hanging around her disgraced neck...

But now, as if it were not enough that she heard their cries in her dreams, now she had to bear the symbolic weight of her sins about her neck. And she was going to be forced to never take it off for as long as she remained at Hogwarts.

Damn him. Damn him and his stupid, painstakingly, logically thought out reasons, she thought with growing anger.

But instead of screaming like she so longed to do, she drew in a deep, calming breath. The very lives she had taken had taught her to calm herself thus.

"He wants me to break down." She stated hauntingly, barely recognizing her own voice. "But he wants me to do it on his own terms, where he can keep an eye on me."

Remus didn't bat an eye. "Are you okay?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"You of all people should know that I don't deserve redemption Remus." She muttered, barely holding her growing anger in check as she turned with the intent of storming down the hall. To where she was not sure, but suddenly stomping around seemed like an excellent idea.

"That's where your wrong." He called after her. "I of all people know you deserve it more than most."

"Murderers don't get second chances Remus!" She whorled, all pretense of pleasantries gone. "Just a chance for revenge. If were lucky."

"Kally your many things. But you are not a murderer. You have to remember that you didn't ask for any of this."

"That doesn't change the fact..."

"That you are perhaps even more a victim than they were. Do you really think they would have wanted you to be blaming yourself like this? You didn't choose to do this. It just happened. You were as much a victim as the rest." He stated calmly. "You almost died that day too."

"I should have." She choked out, turning to stare down the empty hall, no longer able to face him and his cajoling. But his next words were far from gentle reassurances. Instead they were spoken so dangerously that she suddenly had a very good idea of just how far his werewolf blood penetrated.

"I don't ever want to hear you say that again." He said in halting tones, anger and hurt dripping from each word, falling to the ground like a dagger in her heart. She hadn't meant to anger or hurt him. But she

couldn't respond. She simply couldn't... He didn't know what it was like...

"Kally... Answer me. I don't ever want to hear that again..." His voice was closely approximating a wolf-like growl. "To survive you have to first forgive yourself. This is serious..."

She cut him off, her back pointedly to him as she remained blissfully ignorant of how his footsteps grew closer, closing the remaining feet between them.

"Do you think I care!" She hissed to the empty hall, half whispering, half yelling. "You have no idea how I feel Remus! You said it yourself! You don't know what it's like to lose everyone you..."

"Oh I don't? Have you forgotten what I told you about James? Sirius? Lily!"

"By your own hand!" She finished, whirling to face her mentor defiantly, glaring up into his conflicted eyes. "I lived Remus! They died! If it wasn't for me..."

"Kally... They may have died regardless. You helped them along. You spared them the pain of suffering longer than they had to..."

"Malarkey Remus!" She shot out, her eyes flashing as tears welled up. She choked them back. She wasn't about to let that damn Dumbledore have his way and win. No... She wouldn't give him, Remus, or any of them the satisfaction of knowing they had made her cry.

She spun on her heel and stormed down the hall, leaving Remus in her turbulent wake as she stepped into what appeared to be a windowless family room, devoid of any personalization that would show that the house indeed, belonged to Remus. The only sign that someone actually did live there were two worn navy couches and a Muggle television.

"And what's with the no windows!" She yelled loudly, looking for an exit. "I thought you were a werewolf not a vampire!"

"You won't find one." Came a strangled voice from behind.

"The hell I won't..." She grumbled, stalking up the split levels stairs to what looked like a windowless kitchen, Remus on her heels.

"Kally there are no windows as a precaution." He said, no longer bearing any trace of anger from their row. "This is where I used to transform every month, before the Wolfsbane potion was discovered. There were no windows in case I escaped the room I had to lock myself in when I changed. I didn't want the chance of escaping and hurting..." His voice cracked, becoming even more distant. "Another..."

She stopped dead in her tracks despite her hot anger, and turned slowly in the ethereal silence that followed to find him staring dejectedly down at the blue and white speckled tile, leaning on the kitchen table with a forlorn look she never again wanted to see upon his normally smiling features.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you Kalliandra." He choked out. "Your not the only one to have hurt someone you loved..."

"For death is no more than a turning of us over from time to eternity."
William Penn

Chapter 12 Sins of the Past

Her mind was numb with the irony of it all, and for the millionth time a thought occurred to her.

Remus didn't deserve this.

They reached the top of the staircase, and as she set foot on the second level her entire body felt an invisible fluid-like substance pass around her. It was like walking through warm water, only she came out dry.

"Another precautionary measure." Remus said, answering her unspoken question. "When I transformed my parents would stay in the top portion of our house. They had a Tethone ward applied at the top of the staircase within a week of my bite, and because of the traces of silver within it, no werewolf can pass through."

He briskly led her down the hall, continuing. "I transformed in a cage in our basement, and there was always the fear that I would escape one night. At the time, our first floor windows and doors were charmed with the same Tethone ward, but unless the charm is reapplied every few years, it wears off. After the wolfs bane potion was discovered I stopped renewing any of them, but enough of it remains to cause the sensation you just experienced."

They came to a halt at the end of the hall, and Remus shoved open a partially cracked door.

What she saw was amazing.

The lower floor had bore no trace of who Remus was. Not one trinket, family heirloom, or even photograph had hung from the barren walls there.

But as the light from the brightly lit room spilled into the dim hall, she was floored. A red and gold Gryffindor tapestry covered the far wall,

and the Lupin family crest hung above the four poster bed, it's red canopy matching the rich carpeting well. The rest of the room had so many pictures hung that she was vaguely reminded of the photography studio Megan had set up in her basement, only these were all framed, and the walls were a rich gold, not gray.

She spotted a dated poster for the Gryffindor Quidditch team in 1978, and she was struck with the impression that the room's décor had not been since changed. Such was her preoccupation that it took her a moment to realize that she had entered the room alone, for Remus still stood, hovering in the doorway.

Her momentary awe vanished at the sight of him. He was looking even worse than before... "Remus..." She whispered concernedly.

"I haven't changed it since I was just out of school you know." He responded flatly. "There were too many good memories, and this..." He gestured, stepping in. "Is all I have left of them."

"I'm so sorry Remus." She said feebly, hating to see him look so vulnerable.

"Kally, did you ever wonder why Dumbledore chose me as your instructor?" He asked, stopping by a worn desk in the corner. It was the only piece of furniture that showed years of use.

"I suppose... I assumed it was because you were a good teacher."

"The one thing that every instructor longs to hear Kally. I appreciate it."

"No appreciation is needed when it's the truth Remus." She approached him cautiously, watching his fingers play across a propped up frame. "Besides, lying would do no good."

"Wisdom beyond your years..." He said somberly. "Having the strength to tell the truth even when it's unpleasant... There is no substitute for it. Nothing was ever gleaned from sugar coated lies."

She furrowed her brow, wondering what this had to do with what he had said downstairs.

"You see Kally...You and I are very much alike."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he waved her off. "Listen first, then if you still want to argue, you can."

He handed her the small frame, turning his back as he began pacing, leaving her to look at the young girl giving Remus bunny ears behind his back, ducking out of the way as he swatted playfully at her.

He was so much younger there. The gray that now flecked his hair was not yet present, and his youthful face bore no trace of the lines that future years would bestow.

And his smile... It wasn't until now, as she stared at the photograph, that she realized that she had never seen Remus truly smile. She had seen the corners of his mouth upturn into a comical grin, but here he positively beamed at the girl behind him. His photographed self lunged, grasping the giggling girl firmly about the waist before swinging her around. Their happiness radiated like the sun at dawn.

"We are both hated, for being something that we have no control over. Our kinds are persecuted, yours more so than mine though." He said haltingly, gazing out the window. "And those who think we're dangerous, are correct."

"Remus you and I are nothing alike. We have that in common but..."

"Just listen..." He said hoarsely. Feeling chastised she turned her gaze back down to the girl, who had taken to tickling Remus' nose with her hair.

"You were right when you said that Dumbledore chose me because he felt I was a good instructor. But he could have found several competent professors inside of Hogwarts walls to do the job. In fact, it would have been easier for you, had he chosen someone like Professor McGonagall. You could have went to your tutoring under

the pretense of receiving extra help in Transfiguration. Explaining away weekend long absences... That's a little harder."

"I don't mind." She assured him, puzzled because the photographed figures had stopped goofing around, suddenly adopting serious expressions, as if sensing the importance of their conversation.

"You see... There was one quality he had looked for in your tutor, Kally. A quality he could not find amongst his current staff. Can you guess what that was?" He turned to look at her, the bags under his eyes visible from across the room.

She blinked at a loss.

"Dumbledore wanted someone you could relate to Kally. To lose everyone you have ever loved, in such a short time..." Remus paused, swallowing hard. "It is difficult."

He was wrong. Murdering loved ones and losing them were entirely different.

The down crest expression he bore silenced her thoughts, as he continued.

"For me, it started with my parents, and then, three years later my friends were all taken in a single night... But that is not what we have in common."

His spoke quietly, the words he spoke drug up from unimaginable depths in his past. "You deemed yourself a murderer, even though there was nothing you could have done to prevent it."

She disagreed. "No... Remus your wrong. Had I known the monster I was..."

"Kally you are not a monster." He interjected forcefully ,no longer quiet. "A monster is someone like Voldemort who kills to advance himself. A monster is someone who kills because they are ordered to. Monsters are the people who went looking for you. The ones who crept from household to household, killing innocent families of the

candidates, trying to illicit the proper reaction from them! A monster is the man who killed your mother and father, to flush you out, to get you angry enough to use magic you shouldn't possess. That is a monster Kally."

Remus was like a man possessed, pacing quickly in front of the closed window.

"The difference between a monster and the humane is a choice. A monster chooses to kill. The humane do not. Victims feel survivor's guilt. They may even carry it for the rest of their lives, but they do not let it consume them. They resist it because they did not choose to inflict that fate."

He paused, catching his breath from his quiet tirade.

He gazed imploringly towards her, his voice now gentler. "Eight is far to young for a child to learn about death. But monsters often force children to learn too soon. Children like you..."

"I already knew about death Remus..." She interrupted. How dare he bring this up...

"But knowing what it is..." He continued undeterred. "And having your brother and grandmother killed in front of you are entirely different matters."

Her breath caught sharply. "Is there a point to this?"

He stood resolute. "Yes. My point is that Dumbledore did not chose me because of our similar loses. He chose me because both you and I have killed someone close to our hearts. Neither of us meant to, but no amount of guilt or wishful thinking will bring them back Kally."

At some point her heart had begun to pound heavily at the analogy. How could he compare his guilt over James' death to her own? He had not held the knife as she had...

"Don't pretend to understand me Remus." She pointed out icily. "Until you murder your remaining brother and three of your friends don't try..."

"Do you see that picture your holding Kally?"

She stood aghast, his eyes pleading with her, silencing any rebuttal.

"Kally... In your hands you hold the weight of my sins. But mine were far worse than anything you could have ever done."

It was a long while before she trusted herself to speak.

"Who was she?" She finally whispered, brushing a golden lock from her face.

"Cassilyda." He said difficultly. "There was a time when I was lucky enough to call her my fiancée."

Cassilyda nodded vigorously, short locks of hair falling in front of her dark eyes. Remus grimaced as she kissed his photographic self.

"My bite had affected every part of my life... It was a miracle that there was a school willing to educate me. It was even more amazing that I had found not one, but three friends willing to accept me for what I was."

"Others weren't as accepting. The Ministry's Lycan Edict required me to disclose my disorder on applications, and no employer was willing to hire a werewolf. Those who knew of my lycanthropy made sure I was shunned everywhere I went. It is part of the reason I cannot be seen with you at school, when I was teaching, Severus let the Slytherins know. You can imagine the parental reactions..."

"They were fools." She spat, her blood boiling at the Potion Master's betrayal. She had heard of it before.

"I hardly saw the Marauders after graduation. James had his new wife, Peter was always absent, and Sirius..." He frowned, his fingers tracing the photo she had handed him. "Even then he may have been

convinced I was the traitor. It would explain why he was never around at the time."

She nodded, the full extent of his pain visible in his stiff expression.

"I had become accustomed to rejection. My parents spent my whole life preparing me for it. So when it came to Cassy and I..."

His Adam's apple rose, his loud swallow breaking the thick silence.

"She didn't know I was a werewolf. Not even when I proposed did I muster the courage to tell her."

Her eyes widened. "Oh Remus..."

"I was a fool. I was afraid she would reject me as so many others had, so I kept it hidden as best I could." His voice quivered dangerously. "It was hard... During full moons I always had another excuse for why I could not be with her. It took me two years to finally gain the courage to confess. Of course I waited for the week before our wedding..."

"It was a full moon that night, but I was supposed to see her the next afternoon." His light eyes clouded over. "Something about flowers... Wanting to know if I liked chrysanthemums better than hydrangeas for the wedding party..."

His shoulders shuddered, his face paling. "You know of the wards here, but my parents and I had taken, other precautions."

"There was always the fear that someone would apparate in on us while I was transforming, so a charm was placed. No one could apparate within 500 feet of our house. It was meant for safety... Never did I dream it would have the opposite effect."

"She must have come here that night. Why I do not know. Perhaps to see me... Perhaps Peter had betrayed more than James and Lily..."

"All I know, is that I had never escaped the confines of my cage before that night. And when I woke..." His voice cracked. "She was there..."

"Her hair was tickling my nose... I pulled her close, too groggy and in pain from the night before to think straight...That was when I felt it..." His voice broke, his shoulders shaking more violently now. "Five hundred feet is a long way to run from a werewolf...But you don't need to be hearing this..."

"I think I might..." She said, almost pleadingly. Some part of her needed to, as much as it was hurting him, now that he had begun she needed to know the rest.

He studied her, and she silently understood his hesitancy.

"H-her flesh was missing. I must have b-bitten her around the waist. Her arm was s-severed... Her clothes blackened with blood..."

"She must have stunned me... But the w-worst of it... The worst was that she was curled up with me. In her dying moments she had c-curled up with a werewolf, knowing her 'husband to be' had killed her..."

"For a long time, all I could think of was my own guilt Kally. Had I trusted her enough... Had I told her, she would have known to stay away. Instead she never saw her 22nd birthday. All because of my lies." His voice was bitter, his normally kind eyes bloodshot and watery.

"She always joked, that no matter how furious I made her, that if she were holding my hand that I was forgiven for whatever it was I had done that time..."

"And when I found her dead, in my arms that morning..."

"Our hands were intertwined."

"She wanted me to know that I was forgiven. And as hard as that is Kally, I know that I can do no good in this world by letting guilt run my life."

"Yes...It will always be there, looking me in the mirror every day, but if I ever want to help anyone else, I have to move past it."

"She found a way of letting me know that I was forgiven Kally. You were not so lucky with your family, but I know that they would not want you dwelling on something you had no control of for the rest of your life."

"How could you possibly know that?" She whispered tearfully.

"Because in their place that is how I would feel. Punishing yourself forever will not change it. All it will do is destroy your future."

"Pain has a way of poisoning the soul. It makes us forget the things that were once worth living for. And it is pain that turned a young school boy into Voldemort."

"Letting go of your guilt is one of the hardest things you will ever have to do. I won't lie about that. But you have to let go before self-hatred consumes you."

"After all, there is no point in being alive if we are not really living." He let out a long breath, finally meeting her tear filled eyes with a small smile. "Don't you think it's time to stop letting the sins of your past rule you?"

Suddenly breaking down no longer seemed like the weak, or easy thing to do.

It seemed the smart thing.

And as she flung herself onto him, her throat too constricted for words, she finally understood something.

In this world everyone had sins to weigh them down. But while one could not change the past, anger and self-loathing would only lead to an even worse future.

And in that moment, as they held each other, the bond between teacher and student turning to friendship, each of them was finally able to let go of a little of their guilt.

She had been carrying around a guilt ridden soul for far too long.

"Nature does nothing uselessly."

Aristotle

Chapter 13 - Coiled Springs

They lay in wait, darkness enveloping them, thickening the silence they had long since lapsed into. Her silence was unnerving, but not as unnerving as how dark her body had become. He could vaguely make out the lines of her baggy, black as night sweatshirt, clinging to her stiff shoulders.

The fact that it was on inside out, was the only thing keeping her from looking all too serious.

Apparently, the Muggle rock band logo on the outside had been too "bright" for their mission, and upon Snape pointing this out to her, she had stripped it off, right in the middle of a full fledged Order meeting, telling the gasping members to sod off because her bra revealed nothing less than the bikini clad witches they all drooled over in Wizard Mating Weekly.

He shook his head, clearing the thought of a bikini clad Tonks from his mind, and resumed scanning the expanse of green grass below him.

Constant vigilance was needed, for the Dark Lord's patience had grown thin, and he had decided to take a more active role in exterminating Muggles.

Starting with the Irish President.

A shrewd Death Eater, familiar with Muggle politics, had alerted him of an easy way to do that.

They could simply arrange a World War.

Muggles were trigger happy. Every young witch and wizard understood that. So what better way to eliminate Muggles then to turn them against each other.

Besides, Magical Folk had ways of protecting themselves against Muggle warfare, and if the Muggles were busy killing each other then Voldemort would be free to pursue his war against the Ministry unhindered.

All that was needed was a catalyst.

And that was precisely how he and Tonks found themselves perched atop the roof of the Aras an Uachtarain, the Irish President's home, overlooking Dublin's Phoenix Park, searching for any sign of apparating Death Eaters.

There was to be a summit of world leaders hosted in the Aras an Uachtarain's State Reception Room the following day, and the Dark Lord had decided to attack Kenneth Bothan, the current Irish President, and his family.

And the Dark Lord's servants were hell bent on making it appear to be Great Britain's doing.

The shaky alliances between the two countries would be broken, and terrorist attacks would ensue upon Great Britain, the United States, Australia, and several other, yet to be specified countries.

The usual nations would be blamed with a little guidance from some magically enhanced, false, evidence, and the use of the Imperious curse would assure that the bombs would fly.

Even if the Magical World alerted Muggle leaders to this plot, and even if these leaders were to understand that it was a third party causing these attacks and not other nations, that knowledge would be limited to the leaders ears alone.

By Ministry decrees, Muggle leaders would be forbidden to inform their citizens of the magical world's existence, for fear of wide spread retaliation against the wizarding world.

In short, if the attacks began, there would be nothing they could do to assuage each nations collective fury.

The damnable Ministry of Magic would rather let nations kill each other than risk trusting Muggles with the knowledge that witches and wizards indeed existed, and there was nothing they could do about that.

The Orders only chance was stopping the chain of events before it began.

They had to stop the attack at all costs.

I know you hear me Potterrrrr...

The dream's had been getting increasingly lucid...Surreal...

The encompassing darkness was suffocating, pressing down on him from all sides as he searched, for what he knew not, yet he peered into it, wishing for his wand...

Only wands held no sway in the world of nightmares, only force of mind, and his was becoming the weaker as the hypnotic, serpent like voice grew louder, pressing in around him from all sides...

Young fool, do you not realizzzze the power I could givvvvve you? The power you possessssssss...

Pain invaded his mind like shards of shrapnel, forcefully flung, his barriers weakening...

I would nevvver keep anything from you Harrrrry... You could be like a sssson to me, part of our family...

You don't even know what family is, he thought angrily, dots swimming across his blackened vision. The pressure was increasing...

He kept thingssss from you didn't he Harrrry? Kept thingssssss you ssssssshould have known.. Thingssssss affecting thossse you lovvvve, thingssssss from birth...

Things? Nothing was making sense anymore...Pain was all he felt. Pain flung against a wall... A large, dark, brick wall, towering above him in the darkness... What was that doing here...

No, I would never lie to you Harrrry. Not to one possesssssing power ssssuch as myssssself. You and I are different than thosssse other foolssss, running in the minissstry, hiding your prophecccccycy, my prophecccccycy, until it took all thosssse you loved away...

Prophecy... He racked his mind, searching for meaning to grasp onto the word. He knew it... Something about it was important...

Yesssss, jussst sssssshare wittth me. Join me, I sssssshall ssseeeee to it that none you love are everrrr hurrrrrt again. I would neverrrrrr hurrrt my own ssssson... One to sssssuccceed me...

Son...Succeed? That sounded rather nice... He never had had any parents... Anyone to love him, teach him...

Yessss... I sssshall lovvvve you, teach you... I will sssshow you how to hurrrrt thosssse who sssssseek to usssse you Harrrry...One sssssuch as yourssssself dessssserves sssssuch power...

Green mist wafted through cracks in the wall, curling like tendrils, beckoning him forward... They only desired to be let in...

That wouldn't be too bad, he thought eagerly, grateful for a sign of life within the darkness of the hell about him. Some light to save him...

It continued beckoning, drifting over the top of the wall, suddenly visible to him where before it had seemed to stretch infinitively skyward... If there was a sky in this place to be found..

All you havvvve to do is ssssay yesss Harrrry... And everrrrything you ever wanted...Everrrrthing you everrrr drrreamed sssshall be yourssss...

The greenish hues grew stronger, his disembodied feet carrying him foreward, towards the light...

Jussst sssay yesssss...Let me in...

His hand reached the mist as it thickened, coiling around his arms like snakes, slithering their way up towards his mind...

Slithering...

The word invoked something, yet he couldn't quite grasp it... The mist was swirling now, obscuring his vision in a hue of bright green, bordered with darkness as it sought entry, slithering towards his mind ever closer...

Slithering...

Within him the hypnotic cord of deceit snapped and he let out an unearthly wail.

Slithering...Slytherins...Snape...Voldemort...

"Get out of my head you snake!" He howled, thrusting his hands towards the crumbling wall in front of him. Shards of rubble tumbled down upon him, an angry hiss filled the air.

The thick green mist swirled, no longer cooling his skin, but bonding his disembodied legs. He threw himself forward, reaching for the wall still...

He hit it head first, colors dancing before his eyes, obscuring the crumbling bricks from him. Blindly, he braced his body against the unseen ground, pushing with all his strength as the mist squeezed ever tighter...

"I'd never be a son to you, you bastard! Love is a meaningless word to you, not something a deranged, power hungry murderer like you could ever understand!" He yelled into the dark night, the mist slowly evaporating from his body as images filled his head... Images of those he loved...

"For Sirius!" He screamed, using his new legs to prop the lightening wall up.

"For the Longbottoms!" His body was now shaking with exertion, blood and salty sweat dripping down his face, lingering upon his lips like salt water...

"For my parents!" He hollered, the mist disappearing as another hiss filled the air.

The damage Voldemort had done to his slumbering mind had been rectified. His barriers stood re-erected, a glimpse of sun filtering in through the dark night.

He woke with a start, chest heaving, ragged breaths racking his body, and he peered into the surprised blue eyes of none other than Ron Weasley, whom had just had Harry's wand vigorously shoved into his face.

"Calm down mate! It's me! It's me Harry!" Ron hollered, not releasing the firm grip he had on his shaking shoulders.

Harry did not relax at this proclamation. Instead he remained rigid as he took in his friend's face, analyzing him, the dim moonlight reflecting the steely glint of battle deep within his own eyes.

Harry flexed his fingers about his wand, not lowering it from its steadfast position, where it was still aimed directly at his best friend's head.

"What's Hermione's favorite color?" He demanded maniacally, jabbing the wand deeper into Ron's already marked forehead.

Ron jerked away, a look of bewilderment crossing his face. "Harry wha..."

"Answer...the question." He practically shouted, backing away from Ron slowly, perching himself atop his pillow like a cornered animal.

His dorm mates stared at him with jaws agape, but he didn't care. Past experience with Death Eaters and Polyjuice Potion's had left him with something that ran far deeper than paranoia, and after a mental

assault like the one he had just experienced he would take no chances.

"Red...Okay you happy now mate? Now. Put. The. Wand. Down."

He hesitated, racking his brain for the right answer. It took him several long, adrenaline fueled seconds, to realize he had no idea. He had merely picked a question that's answer would never be at the forefront of his mind.

If something was not at the forefront of his mind, Voldemort would not readily have access to it.

He lowered his wand, still glaring suspiciously at his friend. "Hermione's favorite color is red?" He finally asked.

"Yes..." Ron blurted.. "Now care to explain why you practically took my eye out there mate? You were screaming in your sleep so..."

"Voldemort." He replied stiffly, ignoring the way everyone cringed.

"Their getting worse than?" Ron asked concernedly. Over the summer Ron had grown accustomed to his nightly invasions, so it would come as no surprise to him that he was now screaming during them.

He nodded assent, throwing a harsh glare at those still staring. "Shows over, what are you all still looking at?"

Everyone stared in surprise.

"H-harry w-we..." Neville stuttered.

"Neville I'm not in the mood." He snapped. Such was his tone that his dorm mates huffed back to their beds without further comment.

"Harry..." Ron started hesitantly.

"Sod off." He hissed, untangling himself from the blankets, shoving between the curtains and past a confused Weasley.

His feet carried him to the bathroom, the mania he had felt at Voldemort's intrusion had carried over into the waking world, thus his temperament, and why he now found his eyes frantically peering into the impenetrable darkness of the dorm lavatory as he walked, seeking out hidden enemies that were not there. Logic told him this, but years of attack refuted it.

There would be nothing to accompany him here tonight, save paranoia. He would be completely, utterly, alone. The verbal assault he had greeted his dorm mates with assured him that peace at least.

He reached the sink, turning the knob to release the replenishing water from it's spout, and splashed his face with vigor. He dropped his head forward, his elbows supporting him on the cool counter's stone.

The familiar onslaught of pain hit him then, throbbing behind his temples. The pulsating pain of these nightly occurrences always hit him once the adrenaline rush receded.

He harbored no illusion of returning to his dorm to sleep tonight. Not when he was ascertained to either inadvertently intrude into Voldemort's mind, or to have Voldemort intentionally intrude into his.

Voldemort may not know the contents of the prophecy yet, but he had somehow found out that Harry knew, and the creature had been trying to break into his mind ever since. And night was when he was the most vulnerable.

Right now he felt too weak to deal with that. He wasn't about to collapse, like he often did during his Occlumency sessions with Dumbledore, but nevertheless, he was drained from the effort it had taken to shove Voldemort forcefully from his mind.

That was assuming that Voldemort had not let himself be shoved out. In the world of dreams it was awfully hard to tell who was doing the brunt of the work.

A lot had changed in the past month, and not all of it for the good. Sleep was intermittent, his coursework was draining, and the cooling weather just about matched his friends' demeanors towards him.

Especially Ron and Hermione. Every time they looked at him their faces seemed tauter than usual, their expressions strained, lips pursed, voices lowered, and frowns in place more frequently.

He was not delusional. They were too headstrong for him to shelter, and he had already seen firsthand the effects of trying to protect someone by withholding information.

He groaned, spitting out inhaled water into the sink. He thought of Ron, probably still fuming at his behavior. He had never explained the specifics of his dreams to him, and he knew that on some level it had cut his friend deeply. Hermione too...

But until he could bring himself to disclose the contents of the prophecy they would never understand why Voldemort was bombarding him so rigorously, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever be ready to torture them with that knowledge.

At a time their suffering relationships had bothered him. He had hoped the cuts he had made were not too deep to heal, but now he was uncertain.

The list of people fallen around him had grown each year, and he'd be damned to the deepest circle of hell if he lead his friends into danger again. He knew he could not prevent them from experiencing future battles, or playing a part in the upcoming war they all felt fast approaching, but they would not be risking their lives on his account.

Not again.

He'd make damn sure of that, especially since Voldemort so oft taunted him with promises of sparing his friends if he would only join him.

He rose his head with new resolve, brushing his sopping wet, sweaty hair from his eyes. Perhaps a shower would be enough to vanquish

the disjointed images still lashing violently across his mind. Or, at the very least, it might help him brainstorm a bit.

He needed a way to piss Ron and Hermione off. Not that he wasn't doing it already, but he needed to really do it. It would have to be extreme, yet subtle, because if it were anything slightly off they would guess the rationale for his behavior. But if he struck the right nerves properly, their natural pride would be enough a motivator for them to keep their distance.

He needed to cut ties with them, for their own safety. He was a dangerous association to have, and it was time to stop being a coward, seeking solace in friendship and camaraderie, and time to start acting like the man he was supposed to be.

The one that was supposed to take out Voldemort, or be taken out himself.

It was with these thoughts in mind that he stormed quietly to the shower, a quiet tirade of thoughts storming through his mind as he mulled over ways to gain an advantage on Voldemort. It was his favorite past time as of late, and his 6 NEWT classes and constant studying showed the extent of his obsession when it came to finding a way to beat the creature. One thing he had been working on with his friends was animagi study. It had been slow going, but he felt confident he could pull it off. His father had been able to. He would be able to. And after he assured his parting of the ways with Ron and Hermione he'd have to do it alone.

It was time to turn the boy who lived, into the man who conquered.

The crisp wind spiraled earthwards into the clearing, flicking her unkempt locks as it passed around her.

Her presence cast no silhouette upon the dank soil, nor did the trees stretching upwards around her. The branches reached for unseen stars, and beyond them the sprawling expanse of darkness was revealed in the night sky.

She had experienced that darkness, it's very essence lay deep inside her. She knew that now...

She had cupped her hands tightly together, blowing sharply into them to elicit the sound of the wind. That was what Riley had called the deep howling sound this made, at least when he had first shown her and Sean in their youth how to perform the simple task.

She had been born without the ability to whistle. It was a little known fact, but the ability was a dominant trait amongst humans. Without it your lips and tongue could not form the necessary conformation, and that trait had been lost upon her family.

She remembered coming home from elementary classes one afternoon, tearful that all her classmates could whistle the class song, and her eldest brother had taken Sean and her outside to teach them how to do it in a different way.

She silently thanked him, wherever he was, for his instruction had given her the way to call Silverthorne to her. When she needed to escape, to let go, when Remus wasn't there, she could call Silverthorne, and he would take her upwards, to heights where none but the birds could find them, and on special nights, he would take her here.

Silverthorne had left her alone tonight. She needed solitude, and he had understood that. She did not understand their silent method of communication, but she was grateful for it.

As of late animals reared, screeched, and ran from her, and even the owls with the morning post were known to snap. It was nice to have at least one animal favoring her.

But she understood the reason for all of that now...

She now understood why only the creatures of the dead tolerated her presence.

Creatures like thestrals...

That morning a small, tawny owl had flopped onto the house table, several yellowing parchment pages falling from it's talons into her eggs. The owl had taken off before she could even offer it toast, snapping at her outstretched fingers instead.

The only clue as to who had sent the pages had been an inscription on the last page.

I am sorry...The Shopkeeper.

After reading all of it, she finally understood why he had told her, nearly two months prior, that she would not like anything that a book would have to say about Reaches.

She muttered a small illuminating charm, and a feeble light ignited at the end of her wand. She scrunched up her nose in irritation at this, sitting upon the damp soil near the pond's edge. She immersed her feet into the warm water.

She was rubbish at charms, and it had become an endless source of frustration for her as of late. She would not be able to keep up the façade of competency in many of her classes for much longer.

Of course there would be very few things that she would be good at...

She scowled, kicking her feet, sending ripples scattering into the shadows.

She cast her wand aside, letting the light fade as it fell to the ground behind her. She would not be needing it for awhile, and if she did, she would know where to find it.

She breathed the sweet, night air in deeply, letting it cool her mounting frustration. It was a feeling she did not care for. Helplessness did not suit her, and neither did brooding on it, but she had heard the truth about what she was from three photocopied sheets of paper, and not from Remus, and that was more than a little unsettling.

She was sick of everything. Sick of the lies. Sick of the probing questions from her dorm mates. Sick of the way that prat Potter and the Weasel analyzed her every move, Draco had been right about them... If it hadn't been for Dean she may have hexed them into oblivion by now...She was even sick of the way the water now lapped at her feet.

But all of that had been manageable.

All it had taken to throw those minor annoyances into perspective, was three yellowing parchment papers, which now lay crumpled and squeezed tightly within the confines of her fisted hands. .

The pain she had suppressed for so long had been an exercise in futility. She had been hiding from it, when she should have been embracing it.

For now she understood how to use that hate, and that pain...

Strong emotion was a Reach's most powerful ally...

She let the destroyed papers fall to the ground.

It wasn't hard to let it all come flooding back. The guilt, the pain, the anger... Everything that night had caused had lingered for so long, hot beneath the surface of her fragile psyche. It was amazing how much pain one could repress when asked to, and she had done just that.

Recalling it was turning out to be much easier than forgetting it.

The words of the fallen papers came back...

So long as their emotions are held in check their channeling tendencies are under control...

She had already learned on that night what her emotional limits were, now she would learn how far her anger could take her.

It's like a disease...

October's breeze brushed against her skin softly, her hair casually drifting with the breeze, curling forward, splaying out across her face...

A Witch and Wizard's magical ability is determined by the presence of a constant concentration of Magicka Somatic cells in their blood, however a Reach's differs...

The quality of the breeze began to change, no longer offering comfort as it began prickling her skin, as if each one of her cell's were sending a separate nerve impulse, informing her of their increasing discomfort, irritating her...

...their cell concentration fluctuates...

She smoothed a lock of hair behind her ear. Content to allow the rest of her strands to remain untethered.

Her breath came in cooler now, chilling her body more than the warm night warranted. She shivered involuntarily at the light howl echoing in the wind. It called out yet again, taunting her, calling attention to the dangers that accompanied her dark outing within the Forbidden Forest.

It was then that she felt it for the first time.

It was there, lingering like her anger, just beneath the surface, artfully evading her grasp as she reached for it...

She was unsure of what she sought, but as she relaxed her body more, she felt inexplicably as if there were more to the world around her...Like a static electricity prickling the air around her...

Forms of meditation oft bring new perspectives for those who allow themselves to feel nothing but the sensations of the physical world around them...

A light tingling sensation prickled along her fingertips, a grim smile crossing her unseen features as it began traversing it's way slowly up her arm, as if her nerves were awaking from a rather lengthy slumber...

She was feeling her surroundings now rather than visualizing them. It was as if she could feel the very air around her thickening. She wafted her tingling fingers testingly through the thickening substance about her, caught up in the invigorating feel it offered her, unthinking of what it could cost to feel beneath the surface of such things so freely...

What she felt, was the reason her kind was so feared.

For a Reach was neither witch nor wizard. They were a mutation sprung from humanity, their cells geared towards one purpose, and one purpose alone.

The ability to manipulate energy...

It was what allowed creatures like her to kill so easily.

She had never paid attention before, but it was there, pulsating like a beacon of light in the darkness around her. Her eyes flickered under their eyelids as the darkness took on a new, vibrant form, beckoning her to open her eyes and see the world as it truly was.

The tingling sensations grew stronger, the air taking on a hotter quality, every nerve in her body felt afire, burning with an intensity she had never before known.

Her head spun with exhilaration, her cells began multiplying swiftly, burning, yet feeding her...

A moment later loose strands of hair floated easily across the water, flitting from where she had collapsed upon the ground, narrowly missing a tumble into the pools glittering depths, her world once again, fading slowly into darkness...

She had overdrawn.

"Silenco bourderas dispora."

He tore his eyes from the unfriendly storm clouds with a jolt. If he hadn't been paying attention to Tonks before, he certainly was now.

"I'm really beginning to think..." Remus hissed as the sound barrier erupted around them, igniting the dim dawn light momentarily, "That the Andromeda constellation was glad to get rid of you and your utter disregard for protocol."

Her ash gray hair hung artfully in front of her face, obscuring her eyes for a moment, before she flipped it lightly, a gray eye peering over at him all too seriously beneath gray lids. It was remarkable how she could change her whole body color to match the roof shingles.

"Remus while I assure you that my mother appreciated the correlation between my departure from home, and her possessions' subsequent longevity, she never thought I had a lack for protocol."

He snorted. "Your right, it's Kingsley that you drive mad with that."

Tonks merely sniffed before redirecting her eyes to the expanse of ever brightening lawn before them, quietly humming the latest HobGoblins hit, drumming her fingers on the dark gray roof shingles.

It was all he could do not to give her a good hard shove to send her rolling off the roof for the unserious behavior. Besides, it wasn't like she'd get hurt, she was a witch after all, and he was pretty sure she'd bounce.

Yeah, pretty sure...

Just when he'd nearly justified that possible recourse for her nearly giving away their position to the early rising Muggle gardener mowing the lawn below, or even worse, to possible Death Eaters, she interrupted him.

"Your probably wondering Wolfy, why I did that."

Wolfy?. "Well the thought did cross my mind."

"Well since Kingsley and Spruner are due to replace us soon, since their late..." Remus didn't need any reminder about that. Spruner and Kingsley were late, and he had been getting increasingly tense each minute. What if something had happened?

Tonks voice drifted back. "...when they get here they may need a quiet landing area, particularly with that portly gardener outside. I'd hate to have to do a memory charm if he overheard us giving Spruner the night's report."

Almost as an afterthought she added, "Plus I was getting sick of being quiet. It's maddening."

Now he was not a violent man, but he felt his foot twitch slightly in a real urge to kick her.

"Alright Nymph..." He said pacifying. "Next time you decide to tempt fate, because you had an urge to chat, let me know. That way I can remind you how abysmally stupid it is to use a bright spell when were hiding. It's like putting a flashing beacon on a bear trap."

"Your too serious you know that?"

"And so were you up until about twenty seconds ago." He muttered reproachfully. "And since you've obviously missed the analogy..."

"What's the analogy Remus?" She asked placatingly, drumming her fingers and fraying his already frazzled nerves.

"The analogy, is that were the bear trap, and the bear, being the Death Eaters, are more likely to Avada Kevarda us to death if they know where we are because silly girls decide they can cast whatever spell they want whenever they please."

"And you'd prefer that my lump of a boss Kingsley lands loudly and wakes up Muggle Man, String Bean, and the Pixie?"

He groaned quietly. Somewhere, over the course of the night, she had taken to referring to the President of Ireland, his wife, and his nine year old daughter that way.

"Remind me again why you insist on referring to them so creatively?"

"Not personally referring to people your assigned to protect keeps you dis-attached. It dehumanizes them in a way." She stated simply.

"And what was wrong with their official titles?" He asked for the sake of argument.

"It's funner this way."

"Uh huh..." He said, dropping it as he went back to searching the sky for a sign of Kingsley or Spruner.

They were now 15 minutes late.

An idea struck him.

"Tonks, do me a favor. Apparate back to Spruner's office and see what's keeping him will you?"

"And leave you? Don't think so Wolfmeister."

"Wolfmeister?" He said aloud, mortified at what James and Sirius would think of that. "You know I think I preferred Wolfy."

Tonks flashed him a gray toothed grin that, like the rest of her body, matched the roof perfectly. But just as she opened her mouth to reply something flashed in his peripheral vision, freezing his blood cold.

"Don't move." He hissed hastily, the night's tension coming back. He had committed a cardinal error, and so had Tonks. They had gotten comfortable, and as a result, sloppy.

Gratitude for the sound barrier rushed forth and he clamped a steadying hand on her arm for emphasis, silently conveying the seriousness the surprise had claimed from his voice.

He felt her stiffen besides him, and he tightened his grip on his own wand, hoping feverently to see Kingsley and Spruner dipping, disillusioned, from the tempestuous clouds above.

Only there were more than two points blurring swiftly against the underside's of the heavy, dropping, rain clouds.

Far more than those needed to replace their simple lookout position.

There were more appearing than the eye could count in the dim light, and he felt Tonks slowly clenching her hand upon his wrist, squeezing to signal she saw movement below.

He strained his eyes as far to the side as humanly possible, naught to incline his head, and caught sight of three posh, heavily guarded, limousines arriving at the Aras an Uachtarain's front gates, metallic light glinting coldly off the steely iron bar's surface, reflecting bitterly the rays of sunlight that had snuck through the stormy clouds, traversing it's way to the ground, setting it's sights upon the oft damp terrain of Ireland.

He could only hope that sunlight would be the only thing spilled upon these ancient grounds this day, for the Death Eaters were arriving, and he had no doubt that preparations for their attack would soon begin.

He counted nearly a dozen. That were far too many to arrange a quiet attack on the President of Ireland though... His blood froze with the fear of something far worse...

Far worse than anything Snape had informed them of...

He dimly wondered if Snape was up there, fulfilling his obligations as a spy, before his mind, numbed with shock, began operating properly once again.

Startled, he lay there, hissing instructions for Tonks to apparate away, watching the brewing war above him, silently praying there was a way in Heaven for the Order to find every member within mere hours.

They were going to need them.

Harry re-emerged from his 4th shower that morning, where he had been trying to drown himself.

Avoiding Ron had not been easy, and about the only place he could successfully do that was in the shower. So he had remained there until he was positive that Ron's hunger would have driven him and the others down to breakfast.

Only instead of a note griping at him for his behavior that morning, he found one from Ron saying he'd meet him in the Great Hall, and would have aspirin waiting for the headache he was sure Harry must have.

Bloody hell... Why did his friends have to be so understanding?

Pain shot through his head like wildfire for a moment, and he gritted his teeth. Voldemort wasn't content to give up so easily this morning apparently, for he had experienced several such pain rushes. It wasn't the norm for the creature to try to break into his waking thoughts, but apparently there was some urgency driving the maniac to desperate measures today.

He bared the onslaught with grim determination, throwing up his barriers, envisioning the omnipresent, looming wall of the thickest, bricks imaginable...

The rush of pain receded. The onslaught had ended, for the time, yet his head remained reeling, dizzying him to undulating gesticulations, angering him at the effort it took to walk straight.

He felt off balance, and only the fury fueling his blood warmed him.

His fury had burned hotter each time he had been forced to fight for the privacy of his own mind. It wasn't fair...

He stormed into his dorm in time to see a slim figure bent over his nightstand, searching through his drawer, the sun's morning light catching on several rolls of parchment already spread out across his bed, and if he had thought he had been mad before, this took it to new heights.

Kaylens... He thought with a hiss. What the hell was she doing?

In three foul steps he was upon her, grasping her roughly about the wrists and spinning her to pin one arm awkwardly behind her back, the other thrashing hand pinned to his chest to quell her attack. He'd seen what she could do even when caught unaware, and shoved her against the nightstand, banging the backs of her knees against the edge callously to take out her legs.

She uttered nothing, her defiant eyes narrowed directly onto him, a furious look twisting across her tired looking features to hide the cringe of pain he saw. Her legs kicked out slightly but he shoved her harder against the edge, eliciting a small cry this time that left his boiling blood oddly regretful.

"What do you think you are doing?" He growled angrily, squinting in the morning light pouring in from the window besides them.

She stared at him, unnaturally calm for one taken off guard. "Ease off Potter." She stated simply.

"Not..." He shot out angrily, twisting her wrist for emphasis. "Until you explain why your going through my belongings."

"Are you truly that delusional or just really that dense?" She queried.

"Depends on who's asking the questions, which is not you seeing as I'm not the one trespass..."

"Dean borrowed one of my Muggle books." She stated angrily, tossing her head towards his dorm mates bed. "He told me it was up here and I was trying to find it."

"Oh?" He asked sarcastically. "And you expected an inanimate object to find it's way into my nightstand how?"

Realization flitted across her features, softening them for the briefest of moments, before her eyes narrowed onto him again. "In case you haven't noticed..." She muttered. "Your nightstands are not exactly labeled Potter, and since his bed is next to yours I would think it was obvious I had the wrong one."

Right then his paranoia kicked in, drowning out any conscious thought that had until then, reminded him how cruel it was to treat a person thus. There were enough Death Eaters roaming the halls in the guise of Slytherin uniforms as it was, and he wasn't about to trust someone known to regularly covert with the worst of them that easily.

"What were you really looking for?" He asked harshly. He twisted her wrist more but was met with a surprising amount of resistance.

She shoved back, her hand pressing hard against his chest as she nearly twisted away, but his grip tightened mercilessly. He glanced at her fingers whitening tips, his paranoia still overriding any thoughts of sympathy for her.

"Potter I made an honest mistake." She stated with unnatural calm that somehow got through to him. "Now let... go... of... me."

He bored into her eyes for a moment, searching for a hint of the dishonesty he felt sure to find. Only it was absent, replaced by something surprising...

Sheer exhaustion.

Her normally defiant features seemed more relaxed, only in a tired sort of way. Darkened circles fell under her eyes artfully, rather than marringly, as if purposely put there to add to her rather than take away.

He took all this in within a moment, and his grip relaxed instinctually at her words. "What book?" He finally asked, rather weakly as she turned her wrist testingly within his loosened grip.

"Life, the Universe, and Me." She muttered, looking away, her anger at him still apparent.

"Sounds like Astronomy."

"It isn't."

A fresh wave of pain wracked his head and his grip re-doubled as did his suspicions. "I'm not entirely sure I believe you."

She tilted her chin up, staring him squarely in the face. "Then I suppose we have more of a problem to deal with than just your over-inflated ego, that makes you think it's acceptable to know everything about everyone."

"Let me remind you, which one of us spends half their time looking at themselves in a mirror." He shot out, again noticing the darkened skin around her eyes. "You look like hell." He added as an afterthought, stunned by the difference in her appearance since he had last seen her, yet not truthfully meaning it.

She glared at him. "Well not all of us have mommy and daddy around to feed our egos all the time now do we?"

For the briefest of seconds he was unable to find a way to vocalize his fury at such an attack.

Finally he found it.

"I don't know..." He hissed, voice quivering with repressed rage so quietly that one could barely make it out. "What your really doing here... But I will find out. Until that time, I suggest you stay away, and enjoy playing with your Slytherin friend's while you have the chance."

"Is that a threat?" She said, attempting to yank her wrists free. He pulled her back towards him roughly.

"Considering that I think the sorting hat got you wrong, Slytherin, yes."

A malicious smirk spread across her face as she leaned into him, her body pressing firmly against his as she tilted her face up to nearly meet his own. He didn't move, refusing to acknowledge this as she spoke.

"You know Potter...I suspect your right. In fact..." Her grin faded into something more serious. "I suspect the sorting hat got a lot of people wrong this year."

They maintained their hostile stares for another long moment before an enraged voice interrupted their alternating tirades.

"Harry what the hell are you doing!"

He didn't even turn to acknowledge Dean as he stopped pouring all of his hate into the pressure around her wrists and released her, considering what she had just said. "Taking care of a problem." He muttered, staring at a point on the wall as she pushed past him.

He heard a muffled exchange behind him, and mulled over what she could have meant by that. More than one person had been sorted wrong...

"Did you hear a word I just said Harry?"

He snapped out of it in time to see Dean's contorted features appear next to him, and shrugged.

Dean's eyes widened at this. "Well, I'll ask you again, what the hell exactly did you think you were doing?"

"She was snooping through my stuff. What would you have done?" He replied unashamed, turning to put his belonging and unlabeled reports back into his drawer.

Dean stared at him as if flabbergasted, before shaking his head like a wet dog trying to dry off. "What is the matter with you? Do you realize how badly you could have hurt her Harry? I can't believe you actually were acting like that!"

A wave of guilt washed over him for a moment, but he shook it off, justifying his reaction verbally. "You can't be too careful these days Dean. Death Eaters are everywhere, and when you find one known to regularly consort with one going through your drawers..."

"Woah, Kally? You think Kally is a..."

"Death Eater." Harry supplied with a meaningful glance. "It's a possibility. You can't really tell anymore can you."

Dean looked as if he had just been dipped into 20 degree water, set on fire, then re-immersed in icy depths again.

"You really ought to think about things like that Dean, since your around her the most. I'd hate to see her turn out to be one and you her first victim."

Dean had dropped onto his bed, staring wide eyed at Harry for several minutes, simply observing as he put his things back.

"Look..." Dean started more gently. "I understand you've been through a lot Harry, but this paranoia of yours is getting ridiculous..."

"No." Snapped Harry. "This paranoia of mine is what has kept me alive. And don't you dare try and say you know what I've been through because you don't."

It took Dean a moment to regain his momentum. "Forget about it, I'll talk to her, but where have you been this morning?"

"Why does it matter?"

"It matters because Hermione and Ron were just taken away by Dumbledore and he wants to see you too, and because the Daily Prophet reported several attacks on Muggle families last night, and every family attacked had a student here at Hogwarts."

Harry's blood ran cold. Merlin no... Please not her parents, he thought silently. His first instinct was to bolt for the stairs and run to

Dumbledore's office to check on Hermione, apologizing to Kaylens' for his behavior afterwards. He had taken out a lot of unnecessary aggression aimed at Voldemort out on her and Dean after all...

His third reaction was much more logical, and it was the one he showed to Dean as his thoughts from this morning came back to him.

He needed to cut ties with Ron and Hermione for their own protection...

"Send her my regards." He replied calmly, not even looking at Dean as he started leisurely making his bed. "But I was in the middle of something. I'll see her later."

Dean was, for the third time that morning left speechless. It took him a moment to get out the jolted word, "What?"

"I said." He replied with dead calm. "That I was in the middle of something."

Dean was suddenly standing, his arm yanking Harry around to face him forcefully. "The hell you are!"

Harry already had his wand pointed at Dean's midsection. "I do not want to use this on you." He replied in a low, dangerous voice. "I will be there when I am good and ready."

Dean backed off, staring at Harry as if he had never met him before. "Don't you understand?" He asked quietly, suddenly breaking into a yell. "Are you really that thick? Don't you get it? Hermione's parents are Muggles! Harry people are dying! The war has begun! Her parents could be..."

"Dead." Harry cut him off. "Yes, I'm well aware of the possibility."

Dean's entire body was shaking. "And don't you care? Your friend needs you..."

"Like I said, I'm busy."

"You asshole."

"That's one way of looking at it. I simply call it prioritizing."

Dean left, sending him the most vivid glare he had ever received in his life.

The second he was gone Harry collapsed in a heap on his bed, pulling his knees to his chest as his body was racked with suppressed cries of anguish at what he had just done.

But it was the only way... They would never speak to him again after this...

It would keep them, who were still alive, safer in the long run...

It would spare them the pain of him dying if that was what came...

He quickly left the dorm, locking himself in one of the shower stalls as the sobs began to rack him. No one would find him here...

That asshole... She silently fumed, shoving her hair away from her face as she stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror.

That unbelievable asshole...

She drew in a shaky breath, still unnerved by that mornings events, and unearthed the Pepper Up Potion she had gotten from Madam Pomfrey earlier. It would do wonders the nurse had assured her.

Well lets hope so, she thought, glancing at her sore wrist where Potter had grabbed her. It was already starting to bruise, but what pissed her off the most was that she actually understood his fury. She had been going through his stuff, unintentionally, but she probably would have reacted just as angrily had she caught him in her room too.

"What an asshole." She stated aloud to the empty bathroom, as if to reassure herself that she should have every right to be angry with him for roughing her up, calling her a Slytherin, and then telling her she looked like hell.

Well he's right...You do... A small voice told her in the back of her mind.

Oh shut it, she thought, uncapping the remedy and downing it.

The effects were instantaneous. The lethargy she had been feeling since she had awoken from her unconscious stupor that morning, to find a rather frantic Silverthorne grunting at her in alarm, vanished. The nausea that had been so severe that she had skipped eating breakfast altogether in favor of a visit to Madam Pomfrey was significantly lessened as well, and her pale skin seemed to regain some of it's color.

This should have improved her mood, but it didn't. She still was angry at pigheaded Potter for treating her like he had, at Dumbledore for not explaining what he had meant by overdrawing, because that was precisely what she had done the night before, and at Remus...

Oh...Especially Remus... She thought angrily. If anyone should have been upfront and honest with her about everything it should have been him

She unearthed her compact from her back jean pocket, and was just about to flip it open and have a heated word with him, when she noticed it was already glowing.

She snapped it open.

"Remus you have got a lot of explaining to..."

Her voice died in her throat at the bloodied, mangled sight that met her.

"We shall recognize the end of times when the only true innocents left are the ones who lay snug in their tombs."

A. K. Lovell

Chapter 14 Suffer the Innocent

Tonks was exhausted, but she wasn't about to let that on to anyone, lest of all Remus.

She and him strode into the operation's temporary headquarters, which Spruner had set up for them just outside of Dublin. Heated voices echoed in the derelict hall, leaking from beneath closed doors at the end of the run down complex's corridor.

Their relief had finally came.

She and Remus had lain prostate on that cursed roof for nearly twenty minutes after the evil hoards had disappeared from the sky, when Spruner had landed rather noisily next to them, cursing rose gardens to the seventh circle of hell and back. Kingsley had thudded onto the roof next, explaining how they had been delayed en route by the sudden appearance of so many brooms, and had been forced to seek shelter in a garden of roses.

Apparently Spruner's quick landing had been less than precise, which explained the Irishman's pained expression when he had finally sat down.

Tonks pressed her palm flat against the door and it flew open, magically reading her palm print to grant her access. Such security was ironic, she thought, considering how anyone with an Extendable Ear could be privy to the entire conversation from the hall.

"Ever think of soundproofing the place?" She questioned, sliding into an overstuffed armchair in the corner. Stuffing bulged out of tears in the time stained fabric, and she plucked some to toss at Remus as he slid into the chair besides her.

"No need to sound proof Tonks." Tres said. He, amongst other members of the Hogwarts staff, had been port keying back and forth in shifts to the derelict apartment complex in an effort to bolster it's security. "If we soundproofed this it would arouse curiosity. So what you heard outside, oh perceptive auror, is actually the soundtrack to Casablanca."

She grinned at the brilliance of it, before getting back to business. She wasted no time rounding on Snape.

"There were no fewer than three dozen Death Eaters in that sky Severus. I thought this was supposed to have been a small assault on their part?"

Severus was so engaged in the business of interlacing his spidery fingers, cracking them in succession, that she silently congratulated him for his power to ignore others. For all the interest he showed she might as well have not spoken.

"Obviously something has changed Nymphadora." He finally said morosely. "But the question is, what?"

If she hadn't know better she would say the Potion's master looked contemplative.

Remus spoke up. "Well Kingsley and Spruner are out there now keeping an eye on the situation. But the Irish President and his family, and the diplomats are now all in that building. Voldemort's approach has obviously changed, but has his aim? Before it was too be a quiet attack, but that would not explain the enormous numbers Nymph and I saw."

Nymph? She scowled at him. A thought occurred to her.

"You know, before we assumed the attack would occur at the President's home, but if they attempted anything like that with the diplomats there..."

"It could feasibly injure the representatives." Remus supplied.

"Exactly. If Snape's intelligence was correct..." She ignored the glare the pale faced man shot her. "He-who-must-not-be-named wants to turn the Muggle nations against one another by pinning the blame for this planned assault..." She looked around for emphasis. "On Great Britain." She shook her head at the absurdity of it all.

"He can't afford to risk injuring any foreign dignitaries because it would be impossible to do that then. The logic would not stand up to scrutiny, so since the diplomats arrived early it looks like the Death Eaters had to change tactics."

Tres scratched his chin, leaning against an oversized grandfather clock that intermittingly chimed every other minute in quite an annoying manner. "Yes...Tonks brilliant. The Death Eaters presence indicates that an attack will occur. So we just need to figure out when and where..."

The door slammed open, stunning the room into silence.

Kingsley strode into the dilapidated room, alone. His eyes scanned their faces fearfully.

"We have a serious problem."

The door swung shut, it's solid thud reverberated heavily as he and McGonagall walked quietly into the Headmaster's office. Ron shot a questioning glance over his shoulder, silently asking what the hell had taken so long.

Harry could only look away, the weight of shame hung heavy upon his shoulders as his best friend's gaze hardened coldly into his back.

He had been foolish, and felt far too unstable to deal with anyone. His pounding head gave evidence to that.

He had lain in bed, moments before, drowning his conflicted thoughts in a Hermione like manner, forcing himself to read a book on animagi

when Dean barged in. McGonagall was waiting for him in the common room.

He shouldn't have been surprised.

Harry slid into the farthest chair, distancing himself from his friends, yet unable to restrain a look at Hermione.

He had not been sure what to expect. Perhaps he had expected an emotional wreck of tear stained cheeks, or to witness her temper radiating as never before, but there was none of it. Instead she seemed relaxed, and had he not known better he would have thought she had just spent a long day curled up with a book in her dormitory. The only sign of tension he saw was in how her small hand lay clutched tightly within the confine's of Ron's rough palm, and there was not a trace of reddening cheeks amongst either.

Her calm countenance was terrifying.

He looked away, unable to stand her visible strength any longer. She was able to take all of this in, yet he could barely stand to look at her.

"Harry, I'm glad you could join us. I was told you had been unwell this morning." Dumbledore's voice was uncharacteristically severe. All he could do was nod in response.

"I'm glad to see you feeling more sound than." Dumbledore's eyes were oddly cold. "I'll get right to the point. The Grangers are alive, we have received intelligence affirming this."

"You mean Snape told you." Harry interjected.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes Harry. Professor Snape did supply this heartening news. For as long as they are alive, there is hope."

Next to him Ron nodded feverently. Hermione continued staring blankly forward, as if analyzing some complex potions dilemma within her head. And knowing her, Harry realized, she probably was. Her cold logic was how she had dealt with horrible situations in their pasts.

"Harry I am going to ask you something, and if you are not willing, all of us will understand. But since your connection with Voldemort is somewhat unique, and since you have been progressing rapidly in your Occlumency lessons with me, I thought that, with your permission, we could experiment with it."

Call himself crazy, but the word experiment did not ring well. "What sort of experiment?" He muttered nervously, slinking farther down into his chair as Ron's expression dared him to say no.

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "The magic that connects you and Voldemort, Harry, is of an ancient form, better known as Transcendentalism. It is my belief, that if you were to be put into a meditative state, that one could enter your mind much like one enters the pensive of another."

He nodded, following as he avoided Hermione's large chocolate eyes, now focused on him.

"Often, when one attempts to penetrate another's mind through the use of Legilimency, traces of that person's memories are left behind. We call them residual memories Harry. What I want to do is to enter your mind, in order to see if he has left any residual memories there during his nightly assaults on your consciousness. Any recent ones may perhaps alert us to the rationale behind this mornings attacks."

Harry took it all in with silent revulsion. His mind was his only refuge, and it was bad enough that it was violated against his will almost nightly. And now he was being asked to willfully relinquish control to his last safe haven?

He hung his head, knowing there was only one decision to be made. If he was the Order's only way to divulge the comings and goings of Voldemort, than so be it. Some of his personal freedoms would have to be sacrificed.

Not to mention his friendships, he reminded himself, glancing at Hermione's face, her hope barely constrained within it. They would not get hurt on his account, he thought, but he'd be damned if he refused to offer help when he had the power to do so.

He met the Headmaster's gaze head on.

"You have my consent sir."

Remus stepped quietly to the side, a red haired boy bounced by in pursuit of a miniscule blonde toddler who giggled bubbly as she trotted in front of the small group of adults, congregated off to the side of the picnic area.

"This is a logistical nightmare..." He muttered quietly from beneath his disillusionment charm. Not that whispering was necessary. The noise volume here was enough to warrant a stampede.

"...the oldest standing remnant of mankind's fascination with the animal kingdom, Dublin's zoo was the first zoo ever constructed and remains standing to this day..."

He glanced at her outline disbelievingly. "You do realize that we are supposed to be looking for Death Eaters yes?"

"Au contraire Wolfy." He flinched at the name. "We are not supposed to be looking for anyone. We are supposed to be looking after the kiddies here to make sure none of them accidentally wander off while their wayward parents indulge themselves in the h'or d'ouerves."

He barely had time to wonder what sort of head trauma she must have had, that made her capable of thinking so light of the situation, before she was going on again.

"I mean what kind of seven year old has a birthday party with h'or d'ouerves?"

"The kind of seven year old who has a powerful daddy who Death Eaters want to kill." He reminded tersely. "How can you muse on the food selection at a time like this?"

"Because the smell of that cake is making me hungry." She grumbled, resuming her watch over the chaos the children were creating as they ran back and forth, vaulting over tables and knocking over servers. Remus had a headache just from watching it. He could only imagine how their parents must feel. No wonder they were by the h'or d'ouerves, it was safer.

It was also a logistical nightmare. Kingsley had been right about that. It was simply impossible to watch everything that was going on, and that itself presented a serious problem.

While the area the birthday luncheon was being thrown in was relatively small, it was far too spread out for his taste. Sandwiched between the Creative Instincts shop and a type of child's petting zoo called Pet Corners, the roughly thirty children in attendance were able to run into and out of both exhibits. A lemur exhibit stood between the two structures, obscuring his line of sight in that direction, and he found himself constantly apparating back and forth just to keep an eye on the children running around the small cropping of buildings.

Then there was the matter of the Galway sheep in Pet Corners, who were now engaged in a baa-ing competition with several of the more rowdy boys in attendance. A frazzled looking employee was holding a hand over his eyes in a manner that suggested migraine more than sun glare, and now a man with several large, covered bird cages was setting up in the center paved area, while the resident zoologist stood off to the side distracting the children from opening the birds cages while the poor animal trainer set up.

Then there were the President's security personnel who stood off to the sides, quietly observing young Emily Bothan's party, while a caterer was setting up an ostentatiously large pink cake that rivaled the size of the one he had seen at Lily and James'.

With the unorganized chaos that only a large group of seven and eight year olds could create, Remus had a sinking feeling that the President's security detail and the Order's small presence there would not be enough. There were an unfathomable number of entry and exit points to the area, at least as far as witches and wizards were concerned, and while he doubted that a Death Eater would

suddenly apparate into the midst of this and throw a killing curse, he couldn't shake the leaded quality his stomach had taken on.

Tonks opened her mouth, undoubtedly to inform him of some fun fact that she was now reading off about the owls, when he clamped a hand over her mouth.

This was no time to be distracted.

Fas ipse introitus accedo deduco occlume...

Profound blue eyes bore into his soul, benevolent intent gleaming beneath unrecognizable half moon spectacles. His fingers clinging to the chair felt curiously numb under the powerful gaze...

Fas ipse, bene facis...

Something solid lingered upon his forehead, cool and hard now, pressing into his skin as the blue depths of ancient eyes blurred, merging with the walls...

Occlume accedo deduco...

His vision betrayed him. All distinctness of the world blended into solid swirls of color as the solid pressure on his forehead sunk in, his skin opening wide to allow entrance. A blind panic consumed him, the realization that the sharp point would irreparably damage his brain struck hard. His numbing body ceased to operate and he fought. His eyes lolled dangerously in his skull as he thrashed aimlessly...

Do not fight against me...

These words were different. They did not reach him through any auditory capacity he understood. Only the mystic mutterings of an indecipherable language reached his ears, and those words were growing distant. So far off...

Harry trust me...

These words were loud, clear. The only distinct thing he could cling to amidst the disorientation of the senses, whose functions were rapidly fleeing his grasp.

The voice pleaded now, cajoling him to relax as his eyes began rolling farther in their sockets, revealing the terrifying whites to the few witnesses in the room. Witnesses who were dear to him, he knew, but he could no longer see them...

Blue eyes flashed clearly in his minds eye. His eyes rolled one final time, narrowing onto a dimming blue glow in the back of his skull where they had last been seen...

Then there was darkness.

It penetrated his very being. It was so viscous he felt afloat in it. Like swimming upon a river of black tar that warmed his skin. The previous sensations he had once associated with his physical body had all left him, swept down river in the wake of nothingness.

He swam hard, or at least, felt he did. In this world of darkness nothing could be ascertained, not even the darkness itself for he did not feel that it was dark. He merely had a notion.

He stopped swimming.

He floated for eternity, consumed by the bliss known only to those who have never known anything at all, and he was content to remain forever so, adrift in the river of darkness.

The curiously pleasing sensation passed...

Pinpoints of light flashed from the river's depths. Before there had been no up or down, no sense of direction to associate with the river of nothingness, but now lights flashed up from the depths of it, bringing sensations of gravity to him once again.

Blackened water splashed violently in front of him, causing him to sputter and cough as it filled his lungs, yet he did not drown.

He began to sink.

The water engulfed him. A blindingly brilliant light rose up from the waters depths, and his body grew cold in the darkened waters. The deeper he sank the icier the water grew.

Screaming could now be heard. Horrible pain wrenching sobs were rising out of the light filled portal that he was sinking towards. He needed to save them, yet self-preservation screamed at him to swim away.

He fought. Yet the more he flailed his arms, the faster he sank. He frantically searched his feet for the bricks he was sure to find attached to them, but there was nothing to be found save for bare skin.

The light at the bottom of the river rose up to engulf him, the hellish sounds reaching a crescendo of pain as he crossed over...

He spilled out into a dimly lit room, his bones crunching painfully on the hard wood floor. He stood quickly, wavering dangerously as his frightened mind struggled to make sense of the impossible situation he found himself in.

Comfortable looking couches, adorned with well worn throw pillows greeted him. Besides him stood a wooden coffee table, sitting upon a woven rug, it's color robbed from it by the dim lighting. The screams of terror that had filled the room were, for the time, remaining silent.

He squinted in the dark light, running a hand through his miraculously dried hair, searching for those who needed him.

From the shadows two vividly red eyes peered towards him.

Emily Bothan smiled happily. Today was her day, and no one could take that away from her. Even her daddy had said so. Not those important men and women in overly serious business suits that had

arrived that morning. Not the bratty girls from her primary school. Not even the evil gorilla that had grunted at her on the way in.

Nope. No one.

It was her seventh birthday and it was all hers, and to top it off she was at her favorite place in the world.

Her zoo of course!

Even though other people were often in it, her daddy had told her it was hers, and she knew he was right. It was practically next door to her house after all, and she thought it was quite nice of herself to let all those other people, on the days she was not there, to go and play with the animals like she was going to do today.

And she was going to play with the animals today. She sure was. No one was there today save for her and her friends, and daddy and mummy. It was all hers, and daddy had said a guy with pretty tropical birds was going to come and that they would sing for her.

She couldn't wait, which was partly why her over-active, childish bladder had her running for the restroom, her auburn hair flying behind her while her daddy's green suited friends with the sunglasses and earpieces followed in tow.

She wasn't sure why those men had to follow her everywhere, but at least daddy had left those overly serious men and women in business suits at their house today, which she thought was very nice of him. She hadn't particularly liked how they had stared at her when she had come skipping and singing through their meeting this morning. It was as if they didn't know that it was her day or something.

She practically skipped into the restroom, leaving the tall green suited guys outside, and dropped her perfectly small backpack to the ground as she found a particularly clean stall. She was a tidy girl, and only the cleanest would do.

Smiling she shut the door behind her, locking it just in case. Even at her tender age she knew that she really didn't need to lock it,

because her daddy's friends in the dark green suits were standing outside the bathroom doors so no one else could come in while she was there, but her mommy was always saying a good habit is to practice habits, so she did as she was told.

Little Emily Bothan, kicking her feet from her place on the toilet seat, her mind alight with the excitement of what her special day was to bring, never heard the quiet crack the witch made as she apparated into the girl's bathroom.

And as little Emily Bothan skipped cheerily out of the stalls, past her guards in the dark green suits, and out into the bright sunshine on her merry way to her very own private birthday party, she never did notice the new addition that had been made to her small backpack.

Inside something quietly ticked.

"Your infuriating you know that." Tonks grumbled, rubbing her lips testingly.

Remus grunted in response.

Tonks would have glared, but the disillusionment charm nullified the meaning of such subtle gestures. Sometimes she swore that Remus did not appreciate her attempts to lighten situations. That man needed humor more than anyone, and it was humor that had kept her sane thus far in her often morbid line of work.

But come to think of it, the only one who had ever really understood that particular quirk of hers had been Sirius.

The thought of her cousin brought a hard edge to her thoughts, and had Remus been able to see her face clearly, he would have been frightened.

Perhaps it was this sudden anger brought about by his memory that sharpened her attention, but it happened quickly.

As did everything else.

Out of the corner of her eye Tonks saw her.

A flash of black hair, the cruel smile, obscured behind the milling people near Pet Corners...

Tonks whorled but Bellatrix was already gone.

"Tonks what is it?" Remus could be heard asking, but she had no time for responses. Her eyes traced across the gathering, following the path Bellatrix's had taken...

A child with red-tinged hair was skipping in front of a security detail, coming down a path that led from the restrooms.

Her blood ran cold.

"Merlin no..." She whispered, taking off at a run.

"Tonks!" Remus shouted, though she paid him no heed. Her disillusioned body smashed forcibly into a caterer who teetered precariously, nearly spilling his tray full of carefully cut cake slices. Never before had her heart taken on such a curiously fast pace. It pounded beneath her ribcage, threatening to break through as each pump attacked her insides.

The faces of confused Muggles blurred past her, as if she were trapped in a long tunnel and they were outsiders, impeding her progress to the end where the small child was happily beginning to mingle. Sounds of protest were erupting behind her and those in front of her began stepping unknowingly into her path to see the source of the commotion, which was heading for them at a sprinters pace.

Besides her Muggles turned, searching for the source of the rasping gasps of breath she was now inhaling. Such a short distance... So many obstacles...

The child, Emily, for she recognized her from pictures they had been shown at Order Headquarters, had set her small backpack down on a

picnic table and was rushing off, to where Tonks did not care, so long as she was away from what she knew to be in that bag.

Her relief was short lived, her heart lurching dangerously as several boys, whom she recognized as the ones who had been antagonizing the Galway sheep earlier, stopped their chasing pursuit of one another near the table where the bright red bag ominously sat.

She would never make it in time.

"Out of my way!" She screamed. Those nearest turned in her direction, their eyes alert as they darted in the direction of the disembodied voice. Her distraction had worked. She seized the chance as many froze in their tracks, and switched directions, vaulting over a picnic table, sending plates of mashed potatoes flying as she re-materialized.

Her stomach slammed into the table, knocking the breath painfully from her lungs as she seized Pandora's box and felt it shudder. With a final gasp she threw it sky high, knowing there would be no time to draw her wand to levitate it to safety...

A deafening quake roared above, sending hot, smoke-filled air speeding past her burning skin as she threw her body on top of the nearest child, knocking them both to the unforgiving cement with a sickening thud. Hellfire rained down, searing her skin, scalding pain attacked her nerves until her unearthly screams rang unrecognizable even to her own ears, while clammy hands grasped at her hair, yanking visible threads out until a warm red substance cascaded down, blinding her vision before the world winked out.

He awoke on the floor, his breath unnaturally steady for what he had just been through.

But it was not often that he met Voldemort and did not have his life threatened at least once.

On the contrary, he had been offered a compromise. Tell him the contents of the prophecy, and they would live.

Refuse long enough, and they would die.

Voldemort had promised they would not be the last.

A suppressed sob shuddered threw his body. Oh Merlin...

"Mate you okay?" Ron's head of red hair hung over him, eyes wide with fear, no longer holding the anger of earlier.

Harry could only shake his head as a wave of nausea overtook him. He rolled over and vomited across the floor, collapsing in a curled heap, clamping his mouth shut.

It was a bad idea. The rancid stench of it had him hacking again on all fours, the eyes of Ron and Hermione boring into his back with each shudder.

"Get... Get them out of here..." He rasped, waving off a hand Ron had placed on his shoulder. He rose his head to meet Dumbledore's steady expression. It was as if the Headmaster did not understand. If he did how could he look so calm? He had been there with them. He had seen everything. In the end it was Dumbledore who had pulled them both out before things could escalate into something worse than offered compromises.

It was as if something other-worldly had taken ahold. He found himself screaming, shouting, lunging towards Dumbledore. He wanted to hurt him. To strangle him. To do something. Years of repressed anger were coming out, and Ron was gripping him by the wrists, pinning them behind his back as he writhed about like an angry snake.

"Get them out of here NOW!"

"Harry calm down mate..." Ron's voice was shaky, scared even. As he should be, Harry realized, lunging so hard towards Dumbledore that he and Ron both plummeted to the freshly 'Scourgified' ground.

"You knew." He continued, no longer yelling. There was no need to. For his part, Dumbledore stood over them, as calm as ever, but the guilt hid in blue eyes as accusation dripped off his every word. "You knew they were in danger the whole time and yet you did nothing!"

"There was nothing to be done, as you well know Harry." Dumbledore's voice was infuriatingly calm.

"It doesn't matter. You could have forced them to go..." He continued, thrashing out at Ron. Ron let go, rolling out of the way as another of Harry's poorly aimed hits flew in his direction. "Let go of me Ron. I'm not going to do anything."

Ron stared at him like a gaping fish. Hermione had dropped into a chair, her own shoulder's shaking with repressed sobs of her own.

Harry took a deep breath, and a long, hard look at Hermione's shaking shoulders, before he turned to Dumbledore.

"After all I've never really been allowed to do anything have I Headmaster?" He no longer bothered hiding his sarcasm. His guilt at what his mere association had done to Hermione and her family became refocused as rage, and it was aimed at the one person who should have told him everything from the start.

Voldemort had guessed correctly that Dumbledore would propose looking for residual memories in his mind, so he had left one for them to find.

And found it they had. Complete with tortured images of Hermione's parents under the Cruciatus curse in their own living room. And as Harry had desperately fought to go to their aid, Dumbledore had held him back, reminding him that it was in the past, a mere memory they were witnessing. Harry had slunk back, but had been unable to adopt the cold detachment that Dumbledore possessed as the scene had unfolded.

The propheccccc Harry...Join me Harry...Or thesssse Mugglessss will be the firsssst of thosssse you love to fffffeel the true wwwwrath of Lord Voldemorrrrt.

He continued staring down Dumbledore, waiting for the Headmaster to say something he knew would not come.

Make no missssstake Harry. There are ssssome fatesss worssse than death. I can ssssee to it that thessse Muggless and your Mudblood loving friendsss meet ssssuch endssss themssssselvessss if you do not conccccede my ssssuperiority.

Dumbledore had looked on sadly as Voldemort than turned to deliver another wave of curses upon the Grangers. Harry had watched them writhe in pain upon the floor, Mrs. Granger's hair spread out limply, vividly reminding him of how Hermione had looked when she had fallen in the Department of Mysteries. That same fear he had felt for her life had returned full force.

"This has to end." Dumbledore had said quietly. "If only they had allowed us to remove them."

It was then that Harry had found out the truth. The Order had approached Hermione's parents months before, offering them shelter from Death Eaters. They had refused. Not only that, but they had forbidden Hermione from ever returning from Hogwarts. There had been much that Hermione had not told them over the years concerning her exploits with he and Ron.

Hermione had defied them. It was how she was here. She had not only lost her parents approval because of him, but now she very may have lost them. And all because she had come to call him friend.

What kind of friend places one they care for in such danger.

He shook his head disgusted with himself. The wave of anger passed and understanding replaced it. Dumbledore was right. They could not force the Grangers to let them help them. No spell in the world would be strong enough to have safe guarded their home if they had not given their consent for such a protective spell to have been placed.

One could say the blame lay with the Grangers.

But really, the blame lay with him.

Ron approached him cautiously, and this time he backed away before his friend had a chance to extend a friendly gesture. He found himself on the other side of the Headmaster's desk from him. Ron's hurt, confused eyes broke away as a muffled yell resounded outside the office door.

A loud bang, a shout, and the door flew open.

Kalliandra stood there, her face an unreadable mask as her eyes fixated on Dumbledore. She strode forth, oblivious to their presence, her eyes alight with something he himself recognized, yet could not pinpoint...

She stopped short of them, flinging a small object across the room abruptly. Morning sunlight reflected from it, burning his eyes as he followed its long arch towards Dumbledore, unable to pull his gaze away from its flight as a swift blur of long fingers clasped it.

Dumbledore held it steadily, his weary figure revealing no trace of the reflexes his ancient authority had shown a second before, and raised a gaze to Kalliandra, his eyes flashing with the anger of coldest steel.

It was only then that he recognized the object opened in Dumbledore's hand, to be the hallmark of Kalliandra's vanity: Her compact. Harry craned his neck, catching sight of a blurred image flickering within it.

Pavement, reddish masses...

The pain in his head grew stronger at the realization that it did not reflect the reality of the room they all stood within.

It was a two-way mirror.

His eyes met her flashing ones.

"Find them." She whispered.

"Tonks..." He whispered. He had thought he had witnessed horror before. He was only now learning how wrong he had been.

The memory of what he now stood amongst would forever remain burned into his memory.

She had taken off so quickly, his own reflexes had not been fast enough, yet he had made it halfway across the small area when the sound, louder than the sonic boom of a jet engine, had knocked them all to the ground.

He had fallen, grabbing as many as he could, taking them with him, praying the extra few feet's distance from where the bomb had went off in the air, to where they lay on the cement, would make the difference.

Now he found himself, battered, bleeding from far too many places, unable to distinguish his own blood from the others. He rolled over, the bright sun peeking through a break in the gray sky, causing him to squint testingly into the light. The destruction sprawled about him stood in stark contradiction to the pleasant hues it was now bathed in.

For a moment he wondered if God were laughing at his failure to protect those here. But only a cruel God could take pleasure from such torment.

He reached out, seeking human contact as the silence was broken by the first stunned cry. He shook the unresponsive child, receiving nothing. He shoved himself up quickly, rolling the young boy over.

He wished he had not.

A wooden splinter from a picnic table had pierced the child's throat. Blood pumped out slowly from a still spasming artery, a gurgling sound emitting from the throat.

He held back his sudden revulsion at the sight. The child was already gone. No wizardry or Muggle medicines could fix this.

Tonks...The President...Gods...

He stood up, frantically searching for life, ignoring his own wounds as he pulled a large splinter from his arm. The pain he should have felt was replaced with numbness at the sight.

Scattered around the area many were moving, getting up, and crying for others. Some seemed stuck between shock and horror. One of the security guards was actually ripping his clothes off, tearing them into shreds as he bandaged one of the wounded.

He was not the first to have awakened.

He scanned the other children near him. No adults had impeded his way when he had chased after her, so he had taken only children down with him.

His heart flooded with relief as he saw the others stirring slightly. They would live, but they would have scars that not even the strongest of threads could suture.

The dying child had been a victim of bad luck.

And those responsible would pay with their lives, he swore it.

He moved quickly, not removing the disillusionment charm as he moved closer to the Tamarin exhibit. It had been a free standing caged display, and it was where Tonks had been, he had cast his shielding charm in her direction.

The upper bars of the exhibit were melted, bent in at odd angles. One Golden Tamarin lay caught between a bent in bar and an artificial branch, shrieking in pain. An endangered species, he thought, hoping Tonks would not see it, knowing the pain she would feel at the sight.

He continued moving. The damage to those here, on the ground, seemed lessened here somehow. The injuries of those unconscious were not as severe as those who had been injured near him.

His shielding charm had at least meant something to some of those here, he thought, stepping through a puddle of growing blood. There was no helping the man it pooled from. He had been a member of the President's security detail. He could tell by the uniform the man had on when he had bent down to check. But the man's pupils had been unresponsive when he had pried open his eyelids, exposing them to the intermittent sunlight of the day. This man's head injury had brought about brain damage of the severest kind.

Remus turned as the cracks of apparating wizards erupted around him. His wand was drawn, prepared for a duel he lacked the strength for.

"Mother of Merlin..." Came Kingsley's familiar voice, flooding Remus with relief that it was the Order members arriving. They had been patrolling other areas of the zoo. It was no wonder they had heard the commotion. People probably had heard it back at the Aras an Uachtarian.

"Remus, you alright?"

He wasn't sure who had asked because the Muggles were starting to look for the disembodied voices now talking, but got out a weak yes.

"The President? His family?"

"I'm not sure." He said weakly. The Order had made them memorize pictures of them, so they could identify Emily, Marie, and Kenneth on sight. The last he had seen of Marie and Emily had been just before the explosion. They had been far from the center of it, so they had probably received the least of it.

"Start a search..." He heard someone ordering. He continued picking his way through the wreckage, searching for survivors.

"Mummy..." He whorled at the weak sound. It was coming from behind the Tamarin's display and he raced quickly, finding two children, twins from the look of them, on the other side. They sat right up against the cement bottom of the display, one girl coughing unhealthily, her face covered in soot and blood.

He dropped to their sides, disillusioning himself so they could see him. The cement base had provided them a shelter of sorts against the blast, and he silently thanked the zoo designer for that.

Two identical pairs of brown eyes stared up at him, and it took him a second to realize that he had appeared out of thin air to them. "Magic trick." He said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. "I'm Remus. What are your names?"

The one covered in soot spoke first, feebly coughing. "E-eliz-za-zabeth...My si-si-ister..."

"Carolynn." The other child supplied. "Is my sister going to be..."

"She's going to be fine honey." He reassured her, not entirely knowing if he had just lied or not. "Now Elizabeth, can you tell me where your bleeding, okay? Can you do that for me?"

Carolynn was suddenly tugging on his sleeve, pointing frantically at something above.

He followed the direction of her pointed finger and nearly pulled away in revulsion.

Elizabeth's face was covered not in her own blood, but the splattered blood of an unlucky Tamarin that had been smashed between the cage bars by a blasted off tree limb.

Yet the child was still coughing weakly.

"Liza got hit..." Carolynn said, her small voice matching her small frame. "Tree came out of there and..." She smacked her hands together in a way that made Remus flinch.

"Ly-lynni pu-pull-lled me o-o-out..." Elizabeth got out, pointing at her chest with one hand. "It hit me he-ere. It hu-urts."

Dear God, he thought. The child had a chest injury.

He immediately reached for his portkey to St. Mungos. Each Order Member on assignment had been given one for such emergencies, and this was one he was ill-equipped to deal with.

It was only then that he realized that the entire side of his cloak had been torn off, taking the port key and his two-way mirror pocket watch with it.

"When did this appear?"

Dumbledore's voice had been soft, commanding, wielding barely repressed rage as Kalliandra's quivering voice broke.

"A moment ago. I came as soon as I saw."

"Good." His attention redirected towards he and Ron, moving toward where Hermione sat, taking in the change of events slowly. His expression killed all questions he had thought of asking.

"You three are to stay here. Do not move for anything. Understood?"

Ron and Hermione seemed too rattled from Harry's behavior only moments before to respond, so he nodded for them. Dumbledore rose, his robes billowing behind as he strode towards the door, Kalliandra on his heels.

"Kalliandra stay here as well. I trust they have other ways of contacting you."

Her jaw set firmly, she nodded.

"Good. And I will be needing..." Dumbledore raised a hand and a chain rose up from beneath her robes, a glittering ring hung eerily from it. He curled a finger, as if beckoning her towards him, and the chain snapped from around her neck, hurtling towards him across the short space separating them. She visibly flinched at the separation.

The Headmaster's eyes hardened onto her. "You are not to go anywhere, nor are you to attempt anything. As of right now nothing can be done for him. Do you understand?"

She didn't respond, her narrowed eyes conveying her thoughts as she stomped her foot in anger. "I can..."

"You can get yourself killed trying. You are to stay here." With that he turned, the door slamming behind his departing figure.

All eyes turned towards where she stood, her shoulders heaving with exertion. She must have sprinted here... He thought as a bead of sweat trickled gently down her forehead. It was such an odd observation, for his mind still rung with pain from Voldemort's parting words...

A taste, Potter, of things to come...

"What's going on?" Hermione's soft voice tore the hellish memory from him. He could only stare blankly towards her, not knowing whom the question was directed at.

Kalliandra's soft breathing drew his attention her way again. Her angled hair hung limply, framing her face in shadows. "I don't know." Her words seemed deliberate.

Too deliberate.

"You expect us to believe that?"

Harry glanced at Ron, the anger evident in his voice made him realize that Ron was about to take his frustration at his own actions out on her.

"Do you have any idea what your interrupting?"

"Ron..." He warned, noticing how tense her arms were looking, how taut her expression had become. Her expression was one of a trapped animal. Hopeless desperation etched across her features...

"What the hell is..."

"I said I don't know!" She shouted loudly, turning to storm to the other side of the room. She was rummaging through things, searching for something he knew not what.

"Now what are you doing?" Ron growled huffily when the noise of her clatter filled search had nearly reached his own wits ends.

It was then that he doubled over in pain, the room fading away as he fought off the image of slit like eyes that taunted him even in his waking hours. The pain was vivid, harsh, and he had to fight to keep his eyes open.

Ron and Hermione were already there, he could see them, he tried to hold onto their faces. Holding onto what was really there had helped him fight it off this morning...

Kalliandra sat down as well, her eyes unreadable.

Then Harry sensed something from Voldemort that he had never sensed before.

Surprise.

Kalliandra's image burned into his memory, he felt Voldemort digging through his mind, searching...

Only for a change he was not bothering to hide what information he was searching for.

Harry collapsed forward, panting for breath as Voldemort receded, leaving his mind free once again. Only one word lingered on his lips, and he looked up, spitting it with venom as he glared towards her.

"You."

"My lady I have to advise against that."

"Then what do you propose? We keep her with us until one of those bas..." Her mum stole a look at her, stopping mid-sentence to lower her voice until she could no longer hear.

Emily was scared.

She didn't like being scared. And she especially didn't like it when the big people started talking in hushed voices. It was never good.

Just like loud noises. Those were never good either.

She started crying again. Her mummy had grabbed her and ran like that. Her mummy had never done that before.

She didn't understand, so she was crying. Her mummy was there in a second, trying to shush her but she couldn't stop. She wanted to be a big girl like her mum, but her friends and daddy were over where that loud noise had been. What if no one had grabbed them and ran them away like her mummy had?

She sniffled loudly, burying her head in her mummy's shoulder as her mum pulled on the door for the twelfth time. She had been counting. Counting always made her feel better. And pulling on door handles must make her mummy feel better, otherwise she wouldn't keep doing it so often.

"It's not getting any more locked than that. If you keep pulling on it someone outside could see the door move."

Her mum let out an unhappy noise and hugged her to her chest. Emily disliked the overly serious man in the suit even more for upsetting her mum more. Couldn't he see that pulling on doors made her feel better?

Her mum set her down, looking over her head at the overly serious man. "So we should just wait here like sitting ducks then? Is that what your suggesting?"

The man didn't bat an eye. Not that she could tell, he still had his sunglasses on. "My lady I am just suggesting that you both are safer in here than out there."

"And if another one of those things is around?"

Right then Emily noticed how watery her mum's eyes were. "Mummy your crying." She noted aloud. Then she remembered daddy telling her that it wasn't always a good thing to say everything you think aloud.

Her mum dropped to her knees and smiled kindly at her while the overly serious man went on about structural integrity things. Her mum brushed some of her brown-red hair behind her ear.

"Evan, if you think we are safest here I will trust your judgment. I'm sorry for being difficult..." Her mum was talking over her head now.

"My lady it is nothing to be concerned about."

"What if they get in?"

"I have thought of a...precautionary measure for young Miss. Emily."

Emily turned with her mother, in time to see the overly serious man gesture towards an open door at the end of the bathroom. The dark within it scared her.

She looked pleadingly at her mum. She really wasn't going to put her in there was she?

Her mum picked her up. "Pumpkin...Honey mummy needs you to do mummy a favor. Can you do that honey?"

Emily nodded, sniffing only a little, not liking this at all.

"That's my girl." Her mum smiled a bit, carrying her to that open door. Emily looked into it cautiously, and did not like what she saw. It was a scary closet. It was dark, wet looking, with odd looking grass-like things growing in the corners. But worst of all it had looming things

with long wet tendrils hanging from them. They looked like large human stick figures with dangly white hair, only with no arms or legs.

She turned to her mum wide eyed and frightened.

"Honey mummy needs you to go in the closet okay? And I need you to stay there. Can you do that for me sweetheart?"

Emily stared at her. "Mummy that closet is scary."

"Please honey." Her mum pleaded. She kept looking at the overly serious man who had now drawn a gun. Emily didn't like guns. Her mum cupped her chin and turned her back so she was looking at her. "Please Emily this is very important honey. I promise I'll take you somewhere extra special if you do this for me okay?"

A thought struck her. "Mummy what about my party? If I go in there I'm going to miss it."

At this her mum let out an odd noise and covered her mouth. It was a long while before her mum spoke again, only now there were noises outside and her mum's voice sounded more urgent.

"Please honey. Well have you another party darling. Just go in there and no matter what you see or hear stay there. Please honey do this for me?"

Emily swallowed bravely and entered the dark.

Kaylens looked clearly bewildered, but he wasn't fooled. "What does he want with you?"

Hermione rather looked like she had had too much for the day. Ron however was looking between he and Kaylens quizzically.

"Harry..."

"YOU! What does he want with you?" He yelled it with such force that all three of them jerked away. Kaylens seemed the least fazed of the three and shook her head as he pointed at her.

"What does who want with..."

"VOLDEMORT!" Ron flinched, but he didn't care. What he noticed most of all was that Kaylens had not flinched. Only a rare few could take his name in stride as she had.

Most of them were Death Eaters.

"Voldemort, Kaylens. Voldemort. He was here, just now, inside my head." He stood, drawing his wand as Hermione sucked in her breath, tapping his head exaggeratedly with his free hand. "Only the second I saw you, Voldemort saw you too. And you know what Kaylens?"

He had backed her around the desk. She was taking slow measured strides backwards, and he found it strange that she had made no attempt to draw her wand. She hadn't stuck him as someone who would simply tolerate a wand being waved in her face in stride.

Everything made sense now. Her sudden appearance at Hogwarts. He'd bet his Firebolt she was not a transfer. The way she never flinched at Voldemort's name. Her association with Malfoy. Her fake innocent game all the time when she pretended she didn't know what anyone was talking about.

"You're a Death Eater aren't you." He practically hissed, lunging.

She dodged, placing an easy chair between them as he began circling. His eyes were alert, watching for any attempt she might make towards her wand, which he could see tucked into her robes.

"Harry please what are you..." Hermione pleaded, standing as if to move between them.

"Shut it Hermione." He growled. "You don't know."

Ron had already drawn his wand, looking between the two of them as if waiting for one to make a move.

Kaylens glared, skirting in front of the bookshelves. "Potter your utterly mad."

Harry let out a vindictive laugh. Suddenly he did feel rather mad. "If I'm so mad, why aren't you answering the question?"

She shook her head, eyes darting between he and Ron, who's wand now lay pointed at her as well. "Hard to answer a question I don't know the answer to."

"Your either a Death Eater or you aren't!" Ron blurted savagely. "So are you, or aren't you!"

They were each on either side of her, pinning her into place behind a small table with several dusty books. Even the paintings were awake now, no longer bothering to feign sleep as their darting eyes followed the unfolding scene.

"Ron...Harry... Let's just settle down and talk about this for a minute." Hermione said placatingly, her own wand out.

Ron threw a look over his shoulder. "Hermione didn't you hear a word Harry said? He had another vision." He turned back, poking with each word towards Kaylens, sending sparks flying with his wand. "She's...a...Death...Eater...MIONE! Get that through your head."

Kaylens looked more like a trapped animal than before, her hands clutching at the edge of the small table "I suggest you back off." She muttered. "There are more important things going on right now than determining whether or not I'm a Death Eater."

Harry shook his head, stepping closer. "Oh no Kaylens. Whether you're a Death Eater is very much a topic I'd like to explore further. Unless you can offer another explanation for why your lovely master was so surprised to see you here."

She shook her head. "Master? Potter your madder than I thought..."

"He's not going to be too pleased with you is he?" Ron queried. "Consorting with Dumbledore after all. What happened? Offered to help him out with today's attacks, then had an attack of conscience? Or did you just simply lose your nerve?"

Her eyes grew wide and her posture slumped slightly. "Attacks? What attacks happened? Where?"

"Like you don't know." Harry accused.

Kaylens knuckles were practically white as she squeezed the desk harder. "For the last time I don't know what hallucinations you are having..."

"Everyone just STOP!" Hermione screamed shrilly. "There's enough going on without us fighting each other too!"

"Each other? Hermione when has she ever been apart of we?" Ron countered.

"Since she came here!" She yelled. "To Hogwarts! Everyone here is in this together!"

"She's friends with Malfoy Mione! Or have you forgotten..."

"Maybe she sees something that we DON'T RONALD!"

"What do you three have against him?"

It was so quiet that only Harry heard. But then again, he hadn't been foolish enough to withdraw his eyes from her.

"For starts he's a Death Eater." He hissed, his voice holding menace meant for her alone to hear.

"Then I suppose it would be better to be a Death Eater than to be like you." She snarled.

"Stupefy!" He screamed savagely, the red light flew from his wand towards her.

Kaylens upended the table, dropping behind it, creating a barrier as his spell struck fast against the shelving. Bookshelves collapsed, raining texts down as a cry of pain echoed behind it.

Direct hit... He thought, lowering his wand toward the center of the table's surface, preparing to blast threw her impromptu barrier. She would pay for her allegiances...

The books struck her, their edges painfully ripping into her skin. She ignored the sharp sting and flung her back against the wall, bracing herself as she kicked the small table with her legs, sending it skidding forward across the floor to where Potter and his damnable wand stood.

He dove to the side, his legs nearly swept from beneath him as Hermione screamed something unintelligible. He hit the ground awkwardly, his wand skidding from his hand. She lunged, sliding into him with a right hand to his exposed ribs as he reached for his weapon, kicking it farther out of reach as grabbed her hair, pulling her to the ground with him.

A fistful of her hair tore free in his clutching hands, her vision burned white with pain as she unleashed a loud curse, kneeing him hard in the stomach as they grappled on the floor. He might be bigger than her but was apparently unschooled. He doubled over, practically in the fetal position upon the floor, exposing his own head as the wind was knocked from him.

I'm not the only one with long hair... She thought angrily, grabbing the black mess and yanking it back, a poorly aimed curse narrowly missing her.

Pain erupted in her skull. The elbow had caught her right above the temple, her vision swimming dangerously as Potter threw himself forward, scuttling desperately on all fours towards his wand...

"Damn!" He swore loudly, lunging forward, his hand closing around the reassuring texture of his wand when her weight came crashing down upon him, bending his back painfully.

He groaned, throwing his weight to the side, rolling her underneath, straddling her waist as he pinned her arms with his elbows, using his weight to his advantage as she thrashed angrily.

"STOP IT!" Hermione was screaming hysterically now. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ron fighting her off. "Your going to hit..."

"THAT'S THE POINT!" Ron yelled.

He had not breath to spare for their argument.

Kaylens stopped thrashing. For the briefest of seconds he wondered if Ron had finally stunned her, the kind thought was torn from him as she unexpectedly threw her weight, lifting her legs and bottom from the floor and thrusting backwards, sending him somersaulting over her, his own weight betraying him as he rolled uncontrollably away.

He scrambled to grab his footing when several voices rang out at once.

"PETRIFICUS TOTALIS!"

He fell to the floor. Petrified. Just as Kaylens had done mere feet away, her expression frozen in something akin to mild annoyance.

CRACK!

She whimpered, burying her face into the mop. She didn't care that it was unsanitary anymore. She couldn't take the silence, and the mop was her friend. Her mummy had said so.

But her slightly damp friend was unable to drown out her mother's own whimpers.

Her mother's whimpering rose, her feminine voice reaching pitches even Emily had thought impossible.

The sound of the bathroom door slamming open competed with her mother's cries, and the stranger spoke in that weird language again.

Emily heard another thud.

For a moment the light from the door reached her, infiltrating the dark closet in little streaks that snuck in beneath and around the door, brightening the closet for her.

The door slammed shut, and her friend the mop rattled as did the floor beneath her feet.

Silence.

She clung to the damp, cottony strands, pushing them in front of her face, squeezing her eyes shut. Her mummy would come back for her. Her and the overly serious man would not just leave her.

Would they?

She whimpered again, repeating her mothers words to her.

No matter what you may see. No matter what you hear...

Over and over in her head she repeated it. Before long she found herself whispering quietly. She jerked, startled when she realized someone may have heard her, but in doing so he shin bumped again the metal rack behind her. The one she had not yet seen.

The loud clattering behind her as bottles of cleaning solution crashed to the floor frightened her far too much.

She opened the door and bolted, tripping in the light over a large heap on the floor.

Sniffling, slightly hysterical Emily shoved herself up, nursing her skinned knees gingerly.

It was then that she discovered what she had tripped on.

Mister overly serious man lay prostrate on the floor, his features forever frozen in an expression of fury, his eyes wide open, staring sightlessly at the lavatory ceiling.

She opened her mouth to scream, for even a child recognizes death, but no sound came forth. Her voice had frozen, as had her muscles. The only thing she seemed capable of doing was shivering, as she found herself doing despite the warm, stifling air of the room.

CRACK!

"I was wondering when our little princess was going to join her party..."

As the hands clenched around her, Emily suddenly found her voice.

She screamed.

"The first casualty of war is innocence."

A.K. Lovell

Chapter 15 Brethren

Somewhere, far off, somebody groaned.

And it was right about then, when the pain started, that she realized she was not dead.

Despite her pounding head, she had enough energy to be surprised.

Her eyes opened, to find a pair of pale gray eyes staring down at her, beneath a thick lair of soot.

"Were alive..." She groaned quietly, for lack of anything else to say to the boy she had tackled moments earlier.

The kid nodded mutely, an apologetic look on his face as he stared unblinkingly at her, holding up a chunk of her grayish hair.

Merlin I left my hair that color didn't I? She thought fuzzily, scrunching up her nose to let that part of her scalp re-grow.

Perhaps that was the wrong course of action, because she wound up with her bloodied chunk of hair on her face, black roots and all, a second later as the kid stared at her in mounting horror.

"Magic trick..." She grumbled, sitting up gingerly.

She wished she hadn't.

Hell on Earth surrounded her.

She had been in battles before.

She had been injured before.

Never before, had she realized what damage a homemade bomb could do, to such a small group of people.

"Merlin mercy..." She mumbled, clutching the boy's arm reassuringly.

For his part he continued staring straight at the ground, as if fearful to remove his eyes from the spot she had once occupied.

Shock, she realized, bringing up her free hand to wipe the moisture from her brow. She was startled when it came back blackened, flecks of already dried blood clinging to the soot she had wiped away.

Her eyes roamed, for lack of anything to do but sit as her bearings came back.

Order members moved eerily through the dissipating smoke. So slow she felt as if she were watching them in slow motion upon a Muggle VCR.

But what truly got to her was the smell. It was indescribable...

"Fireworks..."

The boy had spoken, barely above a whisper. Only his close proximity allowed her to hear him as he spoke to the ground.

"It smells like them..." He added, falling silent after the clarification. It puzzled her, for wizarding fireworks smelled not of this.

But he would know better than I, she realized.

She had to move. She had to help them. She didn't know what was going on anymore. What had happened was fuzzy. Tackling the boy was last and first in her memory. But the Order members, every one of them who had been positioned elsewhere in the zoo, were there.

She couldn't just sit there.

She stood, pulling him up with her. She ached down to her newly forming marrow, the added pressure of his weight on her unsteady legs was unpleasant.

But the feeling of a warm, live body in her arms was not.

Not once did the boy take his eyes from the spot on the ground, even as she began carrying him towards the outer cropping of buildings.

Only one thought was on her mind.

Twenty nine Order members had been in the zoo...

They had still failed.

"Mummy..." Emily was whimpering now. She hated that she was. But if she didn't cry out how would her mummy hear her?

What if no one heard her?

The thought sent her into a fresh fit of tears.

The mean lady only laughed. "Do you miss your mummy little girl? Would you like to see her?"

Something was taunting about her voice. Like the boys on the playground at school when they pulled her braids, so she knew the lady was not sincere.

She stopped clawing her fingernails into the mean lady's arm long enough to reach up and feel her braids.

The crisscrossing pattern was still there, and she clutched onto that instead.

The mean lady had been dragging her since they had left the restroom, but now she stopped, shoving her in front so roughly that she lost her balance, stumbling to the ground with a terrified squeak.

She did not let go of her braid in time, and her knees hit first, before her cheek hit, skinning that.

She whimpered in pain, too afraid to call out like daddy had taught her if she were ever in trouble.

"Daddy..." She said softly, squeezing her eyes shut. Maybe when she opened her eyes he would be there.

"No not daddy. Mummy! You wanted to see her little brat, so here, LOOK!"

The lady yanked her by her braids, her whole head hurting until she moved, kneeling, but she was scared to open her eyes now. Anything the mean lady wanted was not good. She was never supposed to listen to strangers. She had tried not to go with her either, but she had been too strong.

"Open your eyes you little bitch!" The lady screamed savagely.

Pain shot across her eyelids as the lady scratched them with her long nails, and her eyes flew open.

Her mum lay less than half a dozen yards from her, looking like a risen ghost on Halloween. But beneath her purpled, raw face, blue eyes lovingly connected with her own. Something was wrong though, for her mum's eyes seemed unfocused, hazy...

The man with the silver hair kicked her face away.

"Mummy!" She screeched, horror struck, lunging.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah..." The mean lady cooed. "Little darling your mummy is busy now. Can't you see that?"

Emily kicked out at the lady, missing, painful tears stinging her eyes. The mean lady dug her fingernails into her arm, breaking the skin and blood welled from it, trickling down her arm so fast it frightened her.

"Let go! Let go! MUMMY!" She twisted, screeching, finding her voice. It was higher than she remembered.

Mummy needed up now, she needed air. The mean man was shoving her face into the puddle the rain had left the night before. Her mummy didn't like water.

"MUMMY!"

"I swear in the name of MERLIN if you three don't KNOCK IT OFF I will do more than just BODY BIND YOU! UNDERSTAND?"

Kalliandra couldn't profess to know Hermione well, but she was pretty sure the girl was livid.

A strange tickling sensation flooded her, and she found her limbs again. Kally was on her hands and knees quickly, but a wand was already in her face.

"Don't move."

Such was the authority in Hermione's voice that she actually nodded.

Plus, all things considering, Hermione hadn't actually freed the Weasel or the Jackass yet, whom she figured Hermione had stunned when the Weasel had gotten her. So if the girl trusted her enough to not act the fool, she would not.

Angry as she was.

Hermione had crossed the room to stand right in front of Potter.

"Harry, so help me if you promise not to accuse, attack, or maim anyone in this room I will unbind you. And since you can't answer me I will assume you agree, because you do not want to know what I will do if you go back on the word I just made for you."

She wasn't sure she exactly followed what Hermione had said, but at any rate Potter was now moving his limbs testingly on the floor, and his first order of business had been to kick her chunk of hair, that he had ripped out, away.

Oh how she longed to slug him.

Ron was next.

"I can't believe you stunned me!" Ron grunted accusingly, standing to ruffle his hair.

"You deserved it Ronald." Hermione quipped angrily, moving to stand between the three of them, in front of Dumbledore's desk. "Now if you three are done acting like first years I think we have some things to straighten out."

Ron was still gaping unintelligently. "But you stunned us..."

"And if I hadn't Professor Dumbledore would no longer have a head office." She stated simply. "Not to mention Kalliandra wouldn't have a head."

Kally took great offense to this but restrained her thoughts to a mere grunt. Potter and his twit friend were nothing without their precious little wands.

Ron turned to glare menacingly, straightening up to his full height, leading her to re-consider that last thought. They certainly did outweigh her...

A loud slam jerked her attention to Potter, who was staring right at her.

"Death Eaters don't deserve a head." He growled, from his spot on the ground.

She arched her eyebrows curiously, forcing a cruel smirk. She wasn't about to let him intimidate her more than he had.

Hermione shook her head disbelievingly. "Harry don't be ridiculous. Kally can't be a Death Eater. She's a student and she's in Gryffindor for starts..."

"Pettigrew was too Mione."

Hermione's words died in her throat at Weasley's rebuttal.

"Not to be rude, or anything..." Kally finally snapped. "But if you are going to accuse me of things perhaps you could stop speaking in code so I could actually follow the conversation."

All eyes snapped in her direction.

"Unless you'd prefer to just curse me again." She added, shrugging painfully.

"I'd love to..." Weasley stopped short as a deeper, almost amused voice, cut him off.

"While I realize that my office was outdated, I had no idea the four of you were so interested in redecorating."

"Headmaster I can explain..." Hermione started.

Kalliandra interrupted her. "Remus?" She asked urgently, forgetting all else.

Dumbledore's mildly amused expression vanished. "I am not sure this is the best time to..."

"Lupin? Remus Lupin?" Potter's eyes darted around accusingly. "What does she know about him?"

Dumbledore's white eyebrows arched so high that they actually disappeared beneath his oversized hat. "I do not believe that is your concern Harry."

For Potter's part, he showed the first sign of intelligence since she had met him, and remained silent. Though the stiffening of his shoulder's and the thin line of his mouth revealed the extent of his anger.

"Her concern is as legitimate as is yours, Harry." Dumbledore added with a meaningful look, before crossing the room to place a fatherly hand on Hermione's shoulder.

Her entire body relaxed, her reproachful look vanishing as she crumpled in front of them, turning away for the shelter that only the high back of a chair could provide.

It wasn't until Hermione had disappeared into the chair that it hit her.

Something serious had been going on when she had entered, and perhaps that had something to do with their insanity.

And for the first time since she had met Potter, she felt she actually deserved his punishing glare.

Kenneth Bothan squeezed the softball in confusion, understandably confused about why a group of 'wizards' had just handed him something so odd. He looked up at them, pain etched in his features. "But my daughter is still..."

Remus' heart went out to the President as his port-key was activated, causing him to disappear, mid-sentence.

It was a nasty thing to do to a man whose family was still missing.

"We're looking for them..." Remus whispered, hoping they would find them. A team, led by Spruner, had already been dispatched to search for the President's family, yet Remus had little hope.

It was one thing to stage an attack in Muggle-fashion. It was an entirely different thing to kidnap a Muggle in the old-fashioned way.

If the President's family were still alive, they had probably been taken elsewhere via portkey, and they hadn't the slightest of where to begin looking.

But he wasn't about to take that fact for granted, despite what Spruner and the others thought.

Remus intended to search every area of the zoo that wasn't already being combed, but first, he needed to find Tonks, if only to assuage his screaming nerves.

The relief he felt upon spotting her was incalculable. Silently he thanked God, the gods, whomever the maker was for that. Her endless dribble might annoy him to no end, but the thought of not having that annoyance was too much to contemplate.

It was something he did not want to contemplate.

She had to leave though. That was evident from the moment he spotted her, judging by the awkward gait she was taking. Even with her natural clumsiness the child in her arms would not throw off her balance that dangerously, so he knew she could not be in too good of shape. Her injuries from the battle in the Department of Mysteries were still healing, and now this...

She was so damnably headstrong that he knew she would not leave until she collapsed. And if there were Death Eaters still here, he wasn't going to risk her being harmed again. He had promised Sirius that much.

Bellatrix...

The name came crashing into her consciousness like a brick hurtled from a tenth story window.

She stopped, leaning hard against the side of the building, the boy, Patrick, still held tightly within her arms, as the name attacked her memory.

The blow to her head had driven certain details from her mind, but one had come back.

"You have to get them out of here!" She shouted suddenly, covering Patrick's ears as she screamed across the activity at Order members. "They could still be here!"

Such was the din that only Mundungus and Kingsley heard her. The pace of things was quick as Order members winked in and out of existence, transporting the Muggles to safety, but they needed to move faster.

Only she knew they were moving as fast as physically safe for the wounded.

But she had to do something. Those left couldn't wait any longer.

She shifted Patrick's heavy burden to one hip and dug in her pocket for her portkey.

"Patrick I'm going to get you away from here okay?"

The boy didn't respond. She was amazed to have gotten so much as a name from him in their short walk together, but she knew he had heard.

She set him down and withdrew her velvety pouch. She paused, letting it slide silkily through her fingers, appreciating the small reminder that there were pleasant things beyond this hell.

"Patrick, I want you to hold your hand out for me, like this." She took his hand, moving it palm up. "Now close your eyes for me, and I promise you'll be with people you know when you open them." She sincerely hoped it was not a lie. There was no way of knowing if those he knew had survived or not. But if they had, Order Headquarters was where they would be.

Patrick looked up blankly as she undid the string to the small bag.

"Just close your eyes." She said softly, watching his lids flicker shut. She smiled genuinely, tilting the contents of the pouch into his outstretched hand, glad that at least one child would be seen safely away.

As the grains hit his bare palm his eyes opened, barely registering surprise before he vanished.

"Tonks!"

She smiled wearily as Remus ran up to her.

He skidded to a stop, looking as worse for the wear as she herself must, his eyes scanning her disapprovingly. Odd as it was she suddenly felt like a student caught in the act of something disreputable.

Well he had been a professor, she reminded herself, feeling for the source of pain on her head.

Remus caught her hand halfway there. "Let me see."

She shook her head. "Remus I'm fine. I just have a headache is all."

The look he gave her confirmed her thought that she must look pretty bad. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

Her brow furrowed reflexively and she winced from the surprising amount of pain it caused. "Leave? Remus no. Bellatrix is here."

Remus' face paled considerably. "Bellatrix? Are you sure?"

The look she shot quelled further question. He shook his head. "That explains why you took off...And here I thought they just planted a bomb and set it off with a timer..."

"No Remus. She was right behind Emily and looked far too happy. She was here. She might still be here. We need to get the rest of the Muggles out of here in case..."

His face turned determined. "No. Tonks your still recovering and are beat up enough as it..."

"Me?" She shot back incredulously. "Look at yourself Wolfy." No one was going to tell her she wasn't recovered. She was, and that was that.

He must not have heard her. "Where's your portkey? You can't just make another one..."

"I sent a kid back with it."

His jaw dropped. "You what? Why didn't you go with him Tonks!" He groaned, pulling her towards him. "Look, it doesn't matter. You can catch a ride with one of the other groups leaving. Your in no shape to apparate back."

"Remus I'm not going anywhere." She protested, yanking away. "My aunt did this and if anyone has a right to bring her to justice it's me."

His hazel eyes bored into hers, reading her. She hated that feeling. She had never spoken to him about it but Sirius surely had...

"No." He stated simply. "You can bring her to justice but it won't be today."

She stood her ground, staring back defiantly. "Remus I have no more time to waste arguing with you." With that she yanked her arm free and apparated at random within the zoo boundaries.

She re-appeared not far off, gasping for her lost breath, surprised at the considerable effort it had taken her to do so little.

"Merlin I need a long lie down after this..." She muttered quietly.

"That can be arranged dear niece..."

"Damn't Tonks!" He swore, the edge of panic gnawing at him as he took off at a run.

She could not have went far, not with that gash to the head. Gods she had looked worse close up than he had originally thought. And if Death Eaters were still here and she was caught...

She didn't have a port key, and he doubted she'd have the strength to apparate again.

"Merlin..."

"That can be arranged dear niece..."

She sucked in her breath shakily, drawing her wand as the first curse flew. Her exposed back ached as she dropped, shouting the shielding charm as it hit. The curse reverberated, rebounding violently against a metal chair, shattering it beneath the restaurant's trellis. The metallic clang shook the air, nearby sea lions groaning eerily as the disturbance reached their ears, even beneath the water.

Tonks' rose shakily, on-guard, shoving aside her weariness as the situation sunk in. For she could not leave. Not now.

A small girl wept bitterly, struggling vainly in Bellatrix's tenacious grip, unnoticing of the blood trickling down her arms, soaking her shirt sleeves...

Tonks unwillingly followed the girl's desperate gaze, where it lay fixated on the quivering form of a woman upon the ground, her body twitching from whatever cruelties had been bestowed upon her, coughing and sputtering as if half drowned...

Bellatrix smiled gauntly, contorting her wretched face into a vision from the most haunting of nightmares. Yet, her fright lay in the withering form upon the ground.

Marie Bothan...

The recognition ran her blood cold.

Marie's auburn hair lay sprawled chaotically about her head, blending with the blood pooling in the puddled water from her considerable wounds. Her body twitched spasmodically now, like a fish freshly caught, lying upon a ship deck, gaping for breath wordlessly...

Carion pigeons lingered, approaching the dying woman in cautious hops, their feet clicking upon the ground as they moved to investigate the rich, bloodied scent of death.

Emily let out an unearthly wail, accompanied by a fresh round of kicking.

Tonks shook with fury. "Let... Her...Go..." She gasped threateningly.

Bellatrix smiled even wider. "What do you care for these pathetic..." She yanked Emily's head back, evicting a shriek as her braid pulled on her scalp. "Muggles. They are even more freakish than you. But at least your traits could prove useful..."

"Useful to who Bellatrix? Your pathetic master?"

She had spoken with strength she did not possess, and her mind turned over the hundreds of ways the situation could go more wrong terribly wrong.

"...useful..." A voice, scarred from years of nightly haunts and horror rang mockingly in the still air.

He heard it, slowing to the point where he feared his own hesitation.

He could not risk being heard.

His ears perked, drawing forth oscillations of sound on the wind towards him, giving him direction another with purer blood would lack.

He followed it, his heart leaping as a familiar voice floated to him, beckoning him to the other side of the Lakeside Restaurant. He pressed himself flat against the building, terrified for her, sheltering

from view as his senses quickly adjusted, blocking the foul stench rising from it.

His eyes strained, peering through the gap that permitted trash depository in all directions, and his heart froze.

Suddenly he was no longer sure where the foul stench radiated from, for around the corner he saw faces of death.

Bellatrix Lestrange stood before him, her once majestic face sunken, near holes framing her sockets. Dead black eyes lay fixated where he knew Tonks must lay. And a woman, twitching, dying...

He tore his eyes from her. There was nothing that could be done for Marie Bothan until Lestrange was silenced.

Tonks stepped into view, her eyes alight with fury, holding her cousin's corrupted gaze.

"Bellatrix. Let...Her...Go."

His eyes scanned the area, a shuffling noise had caught his attention, distracting him from the calm that had engulfed the two women. Scavenging sparrows took flight, vacating the area in a fluttering flurry of wings as power mixed with hatred radiated between them, thickening the air...

That was when he saw it. A coy grin crept across Bellatrix's destroyed face, and behind, where Tonks could not see, a head of silvery hair emerged, the death incantation partially formed on his cursed lips.

Remus sprung, screaming with a fury he had never before known. "STUPEFY!"

Malfoy heard too soon, sidestepping his curse as easily as if it were a mere stone, thrown by a toddler.

Remus rebounded as the sounds of Tonks and Bellatrix in full battle erupted, and he began throwing and casting every spell he had every

learnt in earnest. Knowledge was not guiding him now, adrenaline drenched revenge was.

A flash of light caught on Lucius' cold grimace.

Remus froze. It couldn't be...

Lucius had already turned and bolted.

With a last glance towards where Tonks and Bellatrix dueled, he took off in pursuit, gasping, panting as the pursuit led through winding paths, animals screeching in their wake.

Caution had been thrown to the winds as he reached the lake, spotting Lucius on the far side, arms crossed, patiently waiting.

Instinctively he smelled it, what awaited on the other side, for their scent had drifted to him upon the wind.

Wolves...

How appropriate, he thought, the memory of what he had seen flashing through his mind. With that thought Remus growled, apparating aside Lucius.

"You followed."

Remus raised his wand, anticipating the need to hold the other at bay.

Only Lucius seemed disinterested in fighting. It was a feint. It had to be. And his eyes scanned the area for some sort of unseen malevolence.

He spotted nothing, and it disturbed him.

Lucius had his back completely to him, walking to stand beside the rough iron bars that concealed the arctic tundra area. A pale arm reached out, tracing the metal encasement carelessly.

"Lupin, I was half afraid your weak side would hesitate to come. Were all too familiar with your weaknesses where those wretched Muggles are concerned.."

"The only wretched one here is you Lucius." He countered, eyeing him appraisingly.

Surprisingly Malfoy grinned. "Is that so?" He cocked his head to the side tauntingly.

Remus moved, side-stepping around uneven pavement, loath to remove his eyes from the hint of fang he now saw.

It was unnatural...

"Wretched am I? And saintly are the Muggles then? The Muggles who hate you..."

Remus shook his head. He did not have time for this.

Lucius crouched down, his hand beckoning a pair of gleaming eyes forth from the brush beyond the caging. Low snarls informed him that other wolves lay await just beyond his vision. The pack had come forth.

"You know Remus, the Dark Lord has power beyond your wildest dreams, and he does not hate you anymore than your brethren do."

Lucius ran his wand along the cage bars, a flash of hot fire searing them, melting the bars into non-existence.

He found himself hard pressed to ignore the magic he had just seen. Searing was a lost art, yet Lucius had performed it as easily as rudimentary levitation.

In the distance roused growling could be heard. It wouldn't be long until the wolves found their first tastes of freedom.

Lucius spoke on. "You see Remus, you are different than the others. And to serve our Lord is to remember your blood Remus. Serve him and he will give you what you most desire..."

"Oh?" He countered. "And what's that?"

"Acceptance." Lucius growled with finality. Behind him a gray wolf, fangs a glint in the light, prowled. It hovered in the newly formed gap, waiting...

Lucius looked upon the wolf, smiling as if pleased.

"Or perhaps for one as ashamed of his blood as you have proven, a cure, to your ailment."

"Any cure he has to offer would be poison." Remus spat.

The wolves were filing out now, one by one.

"So you say." A triumphant grin crossed Malfoy's features. "But tell me this werewolf, do your precious mud blood lovers welcome your kind with open arms? Would they reward you for your services as my lord will? Or will they shun you as they have continually done so?"

The wolves began circling Lucius protectively, hackles raised threateningly towards him...

Remus did not waver from the power he felt radiating before him.

Malfoy's cold gray eyes glinted maliciously, approaching him with purposeful strides, his canine convey in tow. His words, as deliberate as his steps, came as he reached a hand down, gently stroking the alpha-male leading the pack.

"Join us Remus. Do not make the same mistake your blood traitor friends did."

He shook his head, staring defiantly, unafraid to reveal himself as he spoke truer words than he had ever before uttered.

"I would rather die."

A cruel grin split Malfoy's face as he withdrew from the wolf's thick fur, releasing it from whatever spell it had been under. The animals' lips curled back, snarls reaching a crescendo as it shot away.

"Then you shall!"

Electric blue blazed from mahogany tip suddenly, and he dove to the side, thrusting his body toward the ground faster than gravity allowed. His shoulders plunged into the rough pavement. The spell seared above him, exploding in the underbrush beyond.

Metallic hell resounded as another bar ripped free from the caging, growls erupting near the impact as more wolves roamed free.

Remus rolled upright, crouching, the stunning incantation on his lips as he aimed...

He wasn't fast enough.

Electric blue exploded painfully on his chest, filling his vision with hazy forms. The impact lifted his body, flinging it to an abrupt halt upon the pavement yards away. His eyes lolled unconsciously, vaguely registering snouts circling, many more creeping closer...

Malfoy's eyes danced cruelly, the carnivorous canines parting as he came forth to hover above his fallen opponent. Icy eyes fixated on the beasts, reflecting the warmth within, and the freed wolves cowered.

Canine fangs grew, pricking Lucius' lips as they extended at will from his mouth, the blood trickling down his chin tempting the beasts to attack, to come closer... They cowered... Their fear invigorated him, perhaps even more so than the deaths of the filthy mud bloods, yet these beasts he could use...

He crouched to the ground, his pupils narrowing into vertical slits, yellowing...

"You will get your wish blood traitor. Only your friend's first..."

He smiled cruelly as a single growled word left his throat.

"Brethren..."

Emily's world upended as the mean lady discarded her, thrusting her so violently away that she somersaulted hard on her head.

Her body was shaking so much she barely pushed herself up, tears blinding her. She didn't like being thrown.

"Mummy..." She whispered, spotting her some feet away, and began crying harder.

Her mummy was no longer twitching...

She crawled, her skirt catching on something and tearing, and she stumbled onto her elbows, ripping the skin a bit more. Her shirt, she realized, was already stained by the cuts on her arms.

Suddenly they stung a lot more, and she crawled, unable to stand from fright till she felt her knees reach the puddles her mummy lay in.

She fell on her, hugging her mum tightly with both arms, burying her face in her chest.

She expected her mum to stroke her hair like she always did when her tears fell, only her mum's hand lay in the shallow cold water. She couldn't like that.

Emily lifted her hand and placed it on her stomach. She slept like that, she had seen her. Surely she must be sleeping. Her mum had to be tired. She'd had a bad day too, and Emily wanted her to rest.

But she wanted her to wake up more.

"Please mum..." Emily had her mum's other arm and was shaking it, taking a close look at her mum's face for the first time since she had

gotten there, and she did not like the odd tint around her lips. Maybe it was lipstick, but she had never seen her mum wear that color before...

Emily hurt everywhere, her hands stung, her knees stung, her elbows throbbed. She had shaken her mum so much that the skin on the back of her own hand had been torn off, ripped against the concrete. She was soaked too, having splashed water onto her mum as well. It had to be making her cold, and she didn't want her mum to be cold like she suddenly was.

Emily stopped hyperventilating, swallowing like her daddy had showed her to do when upset, and marveled at how wet one could get from so little water.

"GO TO HELL!"

Emily jerked away at the noise, wiping her freed hair from her eyes. Her braids were ruined now so her hair was in the way. The cruel lady had yanked them so much pieces had come out. Her mummy would be so sad when she woke.

And now the cruel lady's willowy form was towering over the nice one...

"You heard me..." The nice lady on the ground yelled, just before the mean lady's sharp pointed shoe collided with her stomach. Nice lady let out a whoosh of breath and a loud cough, as the shoe came back again.

Emily hated that shoe. It had kicked her mummy too.

"No..." She whimpered, shaking her mum again. "No..." The nice lady was the only one who could help her mummy. She couldn't. She didn't have enough band aids to fix the cuts on her mum, but maybe the nice lady did. But if the nice lady got cuts too...

Emily stood and ran, attaching herself to the cruel lady's leg as it reared back.

"Emily no!" The lady on the ground gasped. She just had time to wonder how this stranger knew her name when the mean lady's hand struck her face hard, nearly sending her away again.

She dug her short fingernails deep. This lady had done it to her, now it was her turn.

The lady had her braid and was yanking her up. It hurt. It hurt so bad that she was seeing little black stars. She wanted it to stop.

Emily opened her mouth and bit down on the mean lady's leg, just as the mean lady's body stopped attacking her and went limp.

It was then that Emily realized that she did not like being smushed. Particularly by people who were heavier than she was, or by people in big, pointy black boots.

Lucius Malfoy stood before the others, a proud smirk tainting his normally severe features.

"It is done my Lord." He informed, bowing deeply. "We will see the fruits of our labors shortly." Behind him the wolves growled, displeased at their new captivity. He had taken some, for his Lord could find uses for their particular talents.

Others he had left free to roam. All the better to finish off any stray Muggle children who may have survived.

"Bellatrix is not arrived."

Lucius shuddered at the note of displeasure he heard.

"Were we not to leave those too weak to fend for themselves behind my Lord?"

A slithering sounded besides him, and he froze, Nagini's fangs gently brushing against his cheek before pulling away.

"I will see to it that she is taken care of Lucius. You may go."

Lucius rose, bowing once more before his Lord's presence, then sweeping proudly from the room.

The transformation of himself was almost complete, and he had other business to attend to.

Tonks gaped in shock, stars swimming before her vision.

Could it really be that easy?

Emily's whimpering yanked her back to the harsh reality of the situation, and she scrambled to unearth the girl from Bellatrix's limp form.

The killing curse...

She had never before used it, and yet she had expected to feel something more...

Or at least something, only she did not. Where there should have been feeling she felt only emptiness.

As she looked at the prostate figure, yanking her heavy booted leg off of Emily's torso, she felt only disgust.

By the Gods what if she had hit Emily instead?

Emily's arms flailed, fighting off an invisible foe as Tonks pulled her free.

"Shh...It's okay now. It's okay..."

This little girl had saved both their lives, she realized, cradling the child's bruised face in her shoulder. Emily's arms seemed so thin, so fragile, and her tiny hands squeezed her around the neck tightly.

Tonks started shaking. How damnably reckless had she been to fire an Unforgivable in the vicinity of such innocence?

Tonks found herself hugging the child just as tightly, needing to feel the warmth radiating from her. She murmured promises that they would get help for her mother and sent warning sparks into the sky to attract help.

She must have collapsed after that, because the next thing she remembered was Emily's frightened pleas for her to wake as Kingsley revived her.

"Headmaster the..." Snape marched through Dumbledore's door, smacking Crusantheus on the way in, only to stop short as the destroyed shelving nearly tripped him.

He was quick to recover, throwing a stern look towards where she and Potter remained seated on the floor. "Headmaster I suggest we speak outside."

The Headmaster did not look up. He had been showing Hermione some Muggle game called cat's cradle for the past few minutes, and for her part, she had seemed interested. "That will be unnecessary Severus. Anything to be said on the matter can be said in front of these students. I trust them implicitly."

She heard a distinct snort from Potter's direction, but was in no mind to pay it any heed. For a change her attention was riveted on Professor Snape, in hopes that he would alleviate some of her frustration. Dumbledore had flat out refused to answer her questions, choosing to remain perched atop his desk, preaching patience.

Snape stiffened. "Very well. The rest have arrived at London Headquarters and Spruner has dispatched a faction to dissuade the Muggle Press."

Dumbledore nodded. "Then that is where we must go..."

"Is Remus there?" She interjected, containing herself no longer.

Snape was furious. "Your impudence is unspeakable girl..."

"That will be enough Severus."

Snape stopped mid-stride, clenching his fist upon closed air. She could see his disappointment. He had been hoping to close it around her head.

"Harry, Kalliandra, you two may come..."

"What about us?" Now it was the Weasel's turn to be bold.

Dumbledore paused, considering the red head's request with a long stare down his bended nose. "I would perhaps, feel better Ron, if someone were to stay here with Hermione."

Weasley's mouth opened, to emit further protest, but it was too much rebellion in one day for Snape.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Weasley. If you argue with the Headmaster again it will be detention."

Weasley's jaw snapped shut like a viper.

"Well now that that is settled..." Dumbledore said, giving Hermione's shoulder a squeeze. "We must make haste."

As if sensing this, a small compartment rose forth from the surface of his desk. Dumbledore waggled his wand and it's contents, a small velvety bag, levitated into his hand where he began kneading it's contents curiously.

"Ms. Granger," He said, continuing his odd inspection. "You may stay here as long as you wish. Today my office is yours. You are also exempt from classes for the day."

Hermione nodded miserably as Dumbledore stalked between them, beckoning them to rise.

Kally scrambled to her feet as quickly as the books surrounding her would allow.

"Professor Snape I trust that you will see they are unbothered."

Snape grunted unhappily.

Dumbledore choose to ignore it. "Now, hold out your hands." He said, as Potter came to stand before her.

She extended hers besides his own outstretched one, careful to not touch his skin as a pale violet dust poured out, moving as within an hourglass. She watched it flow down, ignoring Potter's dangerously green eyes, which dared hers to look back.

The grainy substance felt cool against her hand, and some spilled over from Potter's into her own as he shifted in place. Asides from that, he was unnaturally steady.

Her instructors had once prized her for steadiness. Yet, next to his, her hands shook as if in a quake. It was not a pleasing thought.

"Now shut your eyes..."

Hypnotic, she thought, obeying. A slow tickling graced the nape of her neck, beneath her missing lock, a growing tug behind her navel reminiscent of a port key, only gentler...

As easily as she had slipped into it, she slipped out, her eyes snapping open in a cavernous foyer. She blinked hesitantly, noting Potter's lack of surprise at the dark paneling surrounding them.

"Interesting port key." He commented, tilting his hand, allowing the sandy material to run freely. The violet grains separated in flight, perhaps wisped away on invisible air currents, but none reached the ground.

"A safer medium was necessary." Dumbledore commented, startling her. She had not seen him arrive. "Rather than just touching

something, we have been trying to find more creative ways to activate port keys. It makes it harder for those we do not trust to decipher their true usage."

Her hand absently went to her neck, tracing where his ring should be, right as a loud clatter reached her ears. She jumped slightly, tracing it's origin to behind a closed door at the far end of the foyer.

"MUDBLOODS! BLOOD TRAITORS!"

The thunderous voice crashed through the stifling atmosphere, and she whorled, two hand's steadying her as she nearly knocked into Potter.

"THE NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS! IT SHALL CRUMBLE UPON ITS FOUNDATIONS BEFORE IT ALLOWS MORE OF THOSE FILTHY MUGGLES ENTRANCE..."

His hands stiffened around her shoulders, and she shrugged cautiously away, noticing his face contorting into something so full of hate that she froze in response. His eyes darted around her, towards the screaming woman, pulling at the edges of her portrait with such veracity that the curtains framing it blew as if caught in a mighty breeze, and she swore his eyes flashed with more than anger.

Something about it evoked a memory better left buried, and perhaps that was why she whorled on the screaming creature.

"SHUT UP WILL YOU?" She screeched back.

The portrait caught sight of her, black eyes widened. "MUDBLOOD! OUT! OUT!"

Kalliandra smiled grimly, grabbing a paperweight from the nearby entrance table. She tossed it once, getting a feel for it's weight before she hurtled it across the room, it's thick glass shattering, lodging within the canvas. The woman's wrinkled face recoiled from the tears, clawing at her own skin now, screeching something about her beauty, though Kally could see none.

"TREATUROUS MUDBLOOD! YOU AND YOUR FILTHY MUGGLE PARENTS CAN ROT IN..."

She launched herself over the short table and had closed the distance between them in an instant, her own skin tingling dangerously. The creature lashed out, unable to shred her skin as she knew it must desire. "Never again will you say a word, you disgusting creature..." Kally hissed, staring directly into the vile woman's face.

Kally's skin felt aglow, vibrating rhythmically as she glared into the long dead woman's face. The horrible portrait blinked, her screams silenced for the briefest of seconds as something akin to comprehension shone upon it's face.

The woman flew, disappearing behind her rusting frames.

Kally shut her eyes, inhaling deeply as a calm silence once again engulfed her.

"Let it be." Dumbledore's soothing voice came to her.

She nodded, rubbing the back of her hand across her cheek, wiping away unshed tears.

The kitchen and surrounding rooms had been set up as an impromptu field hospital, which was how he found himself propped up against a wall, his chest searing painfully.

The blast Lucius gave had left a blackish welt across his sternum. Angelina Johnson, in her first year of healers school, had been quick to strip his shirt from him, applying a soothing balm to the burn. So now he was left feeling slightly exposed, wondering how 'soothing' the balm was, for the pain in his chest was growing worse, spreading through his very bones till they resonated with a dull ache.

His only relief lay passed out on a makeshift bed in the corner. The gash to her head had proven second only to her exhaustion, which

had thankfully been the worse of the two injuries, and with the aid of a forcefully administered sleeping draught that was being taken care of.

At least that was what Angelina thought. She had also muttered something about keeping them both in for observation, but he wasn't too keen on leaving Tonks anywhere out of his sight.

At least she's okay, he thanked God silently. Had his shielding charm not worked...

He shuddered. She could have been in the third triage room.

Where those beyond help lay...

At least she was safe. The fact that she had been placed with the most inexperienced healer here was a testament that her injuries were not severe.

It was thoughts like these, running through his head when the kitchen door swung open. It had been motionless for some time.

The door swung in exuberantly, nearly taking out Angelina where she stood. Kalliandra saw this, catching it before it had a chance to smack where the healer in training stood, massing orange paste into the burned scalp of a child.

For Angelina's part, she spared not a glance, not deterring from the careful ministrations her hands made upon the child's wounded flesh.

Kalliandra stood, framed in the dark doorway, emotion flicking across her young face. It lasted a heartbeat, her familiar mask re-emerging so seamlessly that he marveled if it had ever fallen at all.

Remus could not fault her. The young woman had seen more heart ache than the most seasoned of aurors.

It was, perhaps, even more heartbreaking than anything he had yet seen that day.

The healer moved, the young girl's face disappearing from sight behind a back of long black hair. Oddly, she felt relieved. Such innocence on such a face had shaken her.

How innocence could have remained upon that soot covered face, half a head of hair missing, despite the horrors she must have seen...

She would never know.

Her own had been lost too long ago.

She turned away, unwilling to contemplate such fruitless things.

"You okay Professor Lupin?"

Potter's voice was unnaturally flat, yet it drew her attention to where Remus sat, looking worse for the wear, on the dirty floor.

Remus smiled a bit, looking pained. "That depends on whether your housemate over there decides to hurt me or not."

Potter's shoulders re-stiffened.

"Well at least you have an excuse for ignoring me this morning." She countered, ignoring Potter's hurt look. "For a second there I thought you were trying to get rid of me."

His shoulders shook slightly, as if containing laughter for fear of hurting himself. "Ah, the peace I would get!"

She crouched down besides him while the healer said hi to Harry.

Dumbledore walked over. "Good to see you Remus. I deduced that it would be pointless to try and keep these two away, but perhaps we should ask your care-taker for the moment if visitors are allowed shall we?"

"Visitors no." The girl called Angelina countered. "Helpers yes. Come to think of it, you three, move him to another room. I constantly feel like I'm going to step on him..."

"She'll be a regular Madam Pomfrey in no time." Remus muttered wryly, pushing himself up.

"Remus how are you really feeling?" Kally asked, noting how much he was sweating for such a small task.

"Truthfully..." He said with some strain. "Like my bones are being eaten from the inside out."

Harry had crouched down to heave a arm under Remus' shoulder. Catching on she did the same and they hoisted him up.

"You groan like a girl." She muttered.

Remus grunted in reply, and she had to smirk at the look Potter shot her behind his head. Who would have known Potter was capable of looking thunderstruck twice?

"You three go ahead, perhaps to his old room on the second floor?" Dumbledore proposed. "I will be along in a moment, I need to check on things here."

Potter and her grunted under Remus' surprising weight, and after much effort managed to get him up the stairs, depositing him within the confines of a frighteningly cheery room and it's plush, flowered armchair.

Harry's brow scrunched up. "You know Lupin..." He said, between breaths. "You look like hell."

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"Absolute hell." He added, letting Kaylens slide away onto the floor exhaustedly.

Professor Lupin chuckled slightly, wincing only a little. "You know, that's an uncanny impersonation of Prongs. He used to say the same thing every month after the full moon."

Harry threw a sidelong glance at Kaylens, who seemed remarkably unsurprised.

"I know he's a werewolf if that's what your wondering." She muttered crisply. Her tone softened as she turned to Remus. "And he's right. You do look like hell."

Lupin waved a hand, somewhat drunkenly around them. "It's the room. I tell you, frighteningly cheery. Has this effect on me..."

Harry was startled. Lupin sounded like he had just run a marathon.

Harry shook himself, hiding his concern with false cheer. "Your right Lupin, I never did think pink was your color."

Lupin chortled. "Well Sirius did. His idea of a joke, really, when I stayed here..."

Lupin paused, catching his breath, as Kaylens stood, covering him with a throw blanket. He smiled and rubbed the chair fabric. "Haven't been able to get rid of these cursed flowers since."

"Well that gives me a few re-decorating ideas now doesn't it?" Kaylens commented, dropping back to the floor.

"Redecorating?" Harry asked, somewhat against his will.

"Gods no..." Remus muttered.

"And just think Remus." Kaylens continued, an uncharacteristic playfulness in her tone. "If your still ill who will be at your house to stop me?"

Lupin turned a horror filled face to him. "Don't let her near my place Harry."

Harry felt utterly baffled.

Lupin seemed to notice, waving his hand to change the subject. "In a bit I think I'll sleep. Then would you mind checking on Tonks for me? I'm a bit worried... Never know what she'll get herself into..."

Harry started. "What's wrong with Tonks?"

Lupin sobered. "There were attacks this morning. She got banged up..."

For the thousandth time, he felt chilled. How many attacks had there been? "Are you talking about the ones on Hogwart's families?"

Kaylens shot him a curious look.

Lupin shook his head. "No, a different one. Were keeping it quiet and off Fudge's radar, so the Muggles are being treated here by our healers..."

Harry wanted to question him further on details, but resisted the impulse.

"Wouldn't St. Mungo's be better?"

Lupin nodded. "Normally. But the extent of the injuries Harry..." He clutched his ribs, his face cringing till the wave of pain passed. Harry stared at Lupin's chest where the blanket had slid down. The dark spot seemed bigger...

"The injuries Harry, are either minor, or untreatable, even by wizarding standards."

"Lupin your chest, you should have that looked at again..." He suggested, disturbed by the further discoloration. He was positive now that it had spread.

"I'm fine, really... Just bruised up is all... Probably why I look like hell, eh?"

Kaylens frowned skeptically. "Remus what gave you that bruise?"

"A spell. Really, you two are worse than ole' Pomfrey..."

"What sort of spell?" Harry interjected. He trusted Angelina, but he had seen how many people she had been caring for. She could have missed something...

"No clue. Never seen it... It only knocked me out..." His voice lacked conviction.

"Professor Lupin try to remember, what was the incantation? Who said it?" He asked urgently, sounding like Hermione again.

Lupin groaned. "Don't remember and Lucius Malfoy."

Harry felt chilled. Lucius Malfoy was never harmless.

"Who is that?" Kaylens asked, her eyes turned on him questioningly.

"Just the worst of the Death Eaters." He supplied angrily. Until now he had been able to ignore his fury at her. "I'm surprised you don't know. Too low on the totem pole still?" He finished scathingly.

Kaylens' mouth parted slightly, shame and surprise in her gaze.

Surprise like that was hard to fake.

My God... He realized.

She didn't know what a Death Eater was...

Lupin had started waving his hands around again. "Now Harry that's no way to talk to a lady... Your supposed to be a lady's man Har... Your father would be mad at that... Talking to a pretty lady all mean..."

He gaped.

Kaylens looked equally confused. "Remus what..." She said, scrambling to her feet.

Lupin suddenly relaxed, closing his eyes.

"Lupin your acting off." He said, not liking how still he had gone.

Kaylens seemed equally upset, her delicate hand already upon Lupin's sweat soaked brow. "Potter I think we should get Dumbledore." She frowned. "It's strange but there's no fever..."

Lupin's body went rigid.

He and Kaylens exchanged a look.

She looked panicked.

"Remus..." She whispered.

His arm jerked up, nearly striking her across the face.

She caught it, holding onto his arm more for her own protection than his, while he thrashed, his eyes closing and opening as rapidly as his mouth...

Lupin's back arched in the seat, his head supporting him as the bruise widened, spreading across his chest, darkening his skin...

Harry had begun to pace during their conversation, and found himself far enough away to be out of reach, yet close enough to see it.

Lupin's pupils were narrowing into vertical slits, yellowing...

"Kaylens get away from him!" He shouted, lunging, tackling her around the waist as Remus' leg shot out. They clattered to the floor together, and Lupin's leg caught him hard across the stomach, driving the wind from him with a short grunt.

He gasped, his body entangled with her long legs, and he found himself unable to move.

A menacing snarl resounded from the chair, and Lupin's hands curled around the armrests tightly, veins bulging grossly.

He found himself transfixed, frozen as claws extended from those hands, shredding the fabric...

He snapped out of it.

"Move!" He wheezed, grasping her by the shoulder. He staggered to his feet, yanking her with him. They barely made it to the door before Lupin had sprang from the chair, his ribs cracking in their violent outward expansion, his snout turned upwards in a silent howl.

They ran, bending floorboards beneath their pounding feet, the first howl echoing threateningly throughout the corridor.

"Potter! Potter wait!" Kaylens ripped from his grasp, nearly tripping them both.

He grabbed her roughly, the staircase in sight. "What the hell is the matter with you! In about five seconds a werewolf, NOT Remus is going to be on you! Got that!"

She stared, ashen faced. The dim candlelight played across her features, casting their fiery reflection within her frightened eyes.

"He'll follow us."

Tick.

Tick.

"Bloody hell." He realized. She was right. There was a makeshift hospital set within the first floor walls, filled to the brim with people if the kitchen had been any indication.

They'd lead him right to them.

Click.

Kaylens tensed under his hold.

Click. Click.

He held her about the wrist and pulled her closer, protectively, listening to the sound of claw on wood, racking his mind for an idea.

Around the curve, less than a dozen paces from them, a snout emerged.

His breath caught in his throat, watching Lupin's nose work. It was searching for their scent, cautiously around the corner.

It had not yet seen them.

The glinting fangs caught the candlelight before he recognized the pain in his arm to be from Kaylen's tight grip. He caught her eye and she nodded in understanding, and they began moving with cautious backward steps.

His foot reached the top stair first, just as Lupin's entire head appeared.

The werewolves lips peeled back, unleashing a low, soul-shattering snarl.

Kaylens nails dug into him.

It reared back on its haunches and sprung.

"Run!" Harry yelled, flinging her about the waist down the stairs, placing himself between her and Lupin.

He heard her hit the stairs, thunkering down to the first landing with a short yelp of pain, just before the entire weight of a two hundred pound beast came crashing onto his chest.

Kalliandra caught the hand rail, clinging to it long enough to slow her descent. Her arm twisted behind until her shoulder protested, and she tumbled to the hard landing with a thick thud.

She coughed painfully, disturbed dust rising several inches in front of her, when a tangle of arms and fur plunged past, centimeters from her face.

"Potter!" She rolled over to see Remus' curved back smash against the sharp edge of the stairs. They skidded down the stairs, Potter on top, letting out a howl of pain as a claw lashed out, latching into his shoulder like a grappling hook. The werewolves hind legs dug into the stairs, his body pitching free, rolling haphazardly to a halt at end of the flight.

Kally felt sickened. A smear of the blood, pooling from his shoulder, had reddened the stairs in his wake.

She froze mid-thought. The werewolf had risen, it's powerful body undisturbed by such small injury, and it hovered on the flight between them, separating them. A brawny forepaw lashed out at the banister, shredding it to slivers, shards flying at her till she ducked under her own hands, protecting her face from the splintery debris.

A sick, frothing sound met her ears. Remus was salivating from the mouth, his drool puddling beneath him, soaking the wood as he looked between them, choosing his target.

He turned towards Potter's defenseless body.

"Hey!"

The edge to her voice shook him awake like no clock ever could.

He had to move, he thought dazedly, his skull ringing. Only the lower half of his body seemed curiously numb.

He gritted his teeth, damning the searing strike that had shredded his shoulder muscles. His legs were tingling now, and he clambered to his knees with considerable effort.

Tail bone injury, he realized, just as he caught sight of the werewolf sauntering towards him.

Before instinctual alarms had time to go off, something smacked against the creature's curved back, bouncing off into the wall.

"Hey werewolf!" Kaylens hollered, hurtling her other shoe, striking it directly on the snout.

It threw it's head back, snarling at her, baring it's teeth.

"Kaylens no!"

She was already sprinting up the stairs, the werewolf bounding after her.

He drew his wand, screaming for help, throwing every curse he knew at it's back, missing as it disappeared after Kaylens swift figure.

He fought his way up the stairs, leaning heavily on the railing, conscious of the sounds now calling to him. But it was the air, the air that had his attention. It was growing thick again, his hair standing on end prominently as he slipped in his own blood, reaching the top corridor...

"Kaylens!" He screamed, feeling the stifling air pressing harder against him.

He fumbled, tripping onto the ground where he crawled weakly. Footsteps could be heard, stalling behind him.

As suddenly as it had begun, the pressure lifted.

He clambered to his feet, rounding the corner.

The very air seemed to reverberate here, gold flecks of light dancing within it. He was so taken off guard he nearly tripped.

Kaylens lay beneath him, drained of color, her chest too still.

Feet away lay the werewolf, unconscious and panting.

"While I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die."

Leonardo da Vinci

Chapter 16 New Barriers

Harry clenched his fist around thin air, squeezing the life out of some unseen adversary within the quiet hospital wing. The silence was only broken by Kaylens' tranquil breaths, her chest rising and falling as steadily as the light breeze fluttering the curtains.

He'd been cooped up for days, still healing himself, and had been forced to watch her grow ever stiller. Surely he was trapped within one of the seven circles of hell, for each time he looked upon her his guilt rose like a fire, the flames threatening to consume him.

She had saved him. Despite everything he had screamingly accused her of, she had still nearly given her life for his.

Now she lay in this comatose state, and even Madam Pomfrey had been unable to rouse her.

Her skin still held the pallor of death, yet to him it seemed slightly rosier.

Perhaps it was his own wishful thinking.

He rose, unable to remain still, watching her with nothing save his thoughts for company.

Thoughts were such poor comfort...

Not allowed and unwilling to leave, he began sorting through the events of the past few days.

The vindication, the satisfaction, and everything he had expected to feel were conspicuously absent.

Bellatrix Lestrange was dead.

So why did he feel robbed?

The obvious answer came. Tonks had beaten him to the kill. She had killed the one person whose death he had desired above all but Voldemort himself. And now he would never have the chance to avenge Sirius the way he had wanted.

Worst of all, Lestranger's body was gone.

He had wanted to look upon the lifeless face of Sirius' killer and spit upon it.

Now even that cruel comfort had been taken from him.

All he was left with, were unanswered questions, and this cruel circle of hell called the Hogwarts hospital wing.

Still, the facts did not add up. Death Eaters held no loyalty for one another. To them nothing was sacred.

Yet they had salvaged the body.

There was no coming back from the killing curse...

So why do it?

He had unconsciously wandered, finding himself in front of the open third floor window. The autumn scented breeze blew across his bare chest, cooling him. His shirt lay discarded upon his bed, his shoulder gauze recently removed, exposing the claw marks that now indented his skin.

It was necessary, Madam Pomfrey had insisted upon having his wound exposed to the air. He was to be released soon, and she needed to ascertain that it would hold up on its own.

His fractured scapula had been mended quickly, but werewolf wounds were slow to heal.

It was fortunate he had not been bitten, they had said.

Was he lucky? He was not sure. But even when Dumbledore and Tonks had come, he had felt nothing but hollow. His own apathy was almost enough to wish for death.

Only yesterday had Dumbledore's weathered eyes bored into his, recounting the events in full.

"Experimental spells, their effects unknown to the Order, have been added to Voldemort's arsenal of weaponry, Harry. Take heed..."

He would.

He had seen what happened to Lupin first hand, for his transformation had been triggered by the spell Lucius Malfoy had hit him with.

It had happened during the day...

Now, where Death Eaters roamed, the moon would no longer hold it's sway.

Harry shuddered in the breeze, contemplating the many horrors Voldemort might unleash in addition to daylight roaming werewolves.

Of course there was no need to speculate. Dumbledore had told him about the atrocities of late.

Forty seven innocents, four of them children, had walked upon the Earth. Now they lay beneath it's unforgiving soil, removed by the pitiless actions of Voldemort's minions.

Hermione's parents would soon join them, and his cold rational side realized that when it happened, part of Hermione's soul would be taken forever.

"The war is escalating Harry, far more swiftly than we ever expected..."

He was having trouble accepting any of it, for he knew at the heart of it, he was partly to blame.

For if he were truly the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord, than every second he had ever spent reveling in life, and not searching for Voldemort's demise, had been another grave in the ground for the innocent.

A painful chill burned within the claw marks he bore, and he wondered if they had re-opened again, bleeding anew. He reached a hand back, gingerly touching it, the blood upon his fingers confirming his suspicions.

It was doubtful he would be permitted to leave soon.

"That's disgusting."

His froze, turning from the window. He stared, taking her in as she blinked the sleep from her eyes, squinting in the morning sunlight.

"Your awake." He stated, slightly stunned. He had begun to wonder if she ever would.

She smiled weakly. "Your observant."

"You were out for five days."

She paled considerably.

He was slow to recover, and debated getting Madam Pomfrey. But she would be back soon, to check on his own wounds. She could find her awake then. Besides, he was afraid to leave her alone for even a second, fearful that she might fall into that unending slumber once more.

"So how is it?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

He studied her, thinking about how to answer. His pride made him hesitant to admit weakness, but her eyes...

She would discern a lie if he told it, he realized, deciding on the truth.

"Painful." He watched her eyes flicker shut. "You?"

"Like hell..." She murmured.

"You look it."

She graced him with a wry smile, a lock of hair falling into her eyes. She looked almost annoyed.

She reached up, brushing the lock aside, revealing her deathly pale skin. Her controlled movements exposed her own pain to him in a way no words could.

As did her wrist. His eyes caught upon the dark bruise encircling it.

He crossed to her, catching her wrist gently. She glanced up, hazel eyes narrowed in confusion.

"You bruise easily don't you?" He asked, cautiously turning her hand in his. It was so delicate he was afraid it would break further than it already had from her fall.

Her eyes traveled to where his fingers lay.

"Apparently." Her voice was so faint...

"Pomfrey said she had taken care of this." He whispered aloud, gently relinquishing her hand. She let it fall upon her pillow, besides her face. "Your bones may not have healed properly."

She flexed it back and forth, grimacing slightly. "It's fine."

"Right." He said skeptically, withdrawing to the bed across from her, sitting upon the taunt sheets.

It was funny, but had she had woken a few days earlier he probably would have demanded answers, answers about how she knew Lupin, about what she really did or did not know about Death Eaters, but

after days of sitting there, watching her frail figure sleep, the mere thought of interrogating her bothered him.

His answers could wait, for a little while at least.

"Tonks stopped by earlier." He said, breaking the silence. "She said Lupin sends his love."

Her eyes opened hopefully. "So he's..."

"Yeah." He finished.

She sunk farther into the mattress. "Thank God. Finally something's gone right..."

She lay there, so still, for so long, he would have sworn she slept. It was part fear, fear that she would not awake, that drove him to the admission.

"You saved my life." He said quietly.

She stretched ever so slightly, the sheets sliding away to reveal her bare toes. Her face relaxed, almost serenely. "You saved mine first."

He wanted to argue, but lacked the heart, watching how her eyes broke from his, dancing away.

"That fall down the stairs you took... I probably wouldn't have held up."

Looking at how fragile she seemed, he realized she spoke the truth.

It was then that Pomfrey walked in.

He tore his eyes from her, and allowed Pomfrey to fuss over him willingly this time.

Several days later he had been prepped to leave. His left arm hung loose in a sling, preventing unnecessary movement.

Lupin's claws had torn into him just beneath his shoulder blade, right where several muscles came together. Apparently re-growing muscles was as tricky as re-growing bones.

He still needed to talk to Kaylens, but she slept. They had not shared a word since she had first awoken, content to sit there in silence. He was debating whether or not to break that silence when a frustrated looking Ron walked in.

Looking at Ron, he realized that there were other things that had to be taken care of first.

He had been dreading this conversation for days. Ron and Hermione would want answers. Answers about his absence... Answers about what had occurred in Dumbledore's office days earlier... Answers about Voldemort's intrusions into his mind...

Answers he could not give.

How could he explain the pressure he felt, or Voldemort's intrusions, without revealing the contents of the prophecy?

How could he explain what had gone on at Sirius', without revealing all he had seen?

And how could he explain why Hermione's parents had been taken from her? They would never accept 'because of me' as an answer.

He threw a last glance at Kaylens' sleeping form. They would talk later. He promised himself that.

He and Ron stepped into the hall. It was mercifully vacant, making the stone-lined corridor appear longer than usual.

It had been over a week since he and Kaylens had disappeared from the Headmaster's office, and one of the last warm weekends of the year had driven the student body outside.

As for him, during that time, Voldemort had left his mind alone. He had felt the beginnings of an intrusion days earlier, but Riddle had withdrawn, sensing that his decision had not yet been made.

Riddle had given him more time due to his injury, and for that, Harry had to give him credit.

As evil as Voldemort was, the creature had some class.

They walked in silence, Ron's eyes darting towards him. He knew Ron was trying to decide what was safe to discuss.

Harry decided to spare him the awkwardness. "How's Hermione?"

Ron shrugged despondently. "How do you think she's doing?"

"Not good." The absence of people made the corridor cavernous, and his breath echoed quietly.

"Harry what's going on?"

I wish I knew Ron... His own frustration at this very question had been building inside for days. Dumbledore had told him some, but there was still the question of Kaylens. How did she fit into all of this? Did she even? And Voldemort... There had to be more to it, because the pieces Dumbledore had told him did not fit with what he had seen through Voldemort's own eyes.

Not to mention the prophecy. How in the hell was he supposed to beat him?

There were too many questions to answer, before the most important ones could even be framed.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Hermione was there, waiting for them in the empty dormitory, sprawled out with a book on Ron's bed. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles, similar to Kaylens.

Misery loves company, he thought. Ron sat besides her, placing a hand on her back. Only then did she seem to realize they were there.

"Harry...H-how are you?"

He smiled for her benefit. "The question is, how are you?"

She shrugged, re-burying her nose into her book. "They wouldn't let us see you."

"I know."

"Why?" Ron asked.

Harry dropped his bag onto the bed, and began removing the few belongings Pomfrey had brought down for him. "Dumbledore's orders." His eyes would not meet theirs.

Ron frowned. "His reason?"

So he could have time to brief us on what we could or could not say to you, he thought.

"He didn't want us seen. We weren't in..." He shrugged with one shoulder. "No one should have seen us after it okay?"

Hermione's eyes roamed, landing on his sling.

He caught the unspoken question. "Werewolf wounds are slow to heal."

They both looked at him as if he were a new species.

"W-were you...?" Ron stammered.

"No. I was not bitten."

Hermione looked skeptical. "Harry that's not possible."

"Why?" She cringed at his forcefulness.

"Because the full moon isn't until..."

"This weekend. Yes I know 'Mione."

"Then how could a werewolf..."

His expression turned grave. "There are ways."

Hermione was no longer even trying to read, her voice unusually high. "That can't be. A werewolf can't change out of lunar sequence..."

"Don't be so sure of that." He said bitterly.

Ron looked between them. "How? How could it Harry?"

Harry stared him down, unblinking. "Voldemort."

Ron's blue eyes widened, his freckles standing out against his paling skin, putting two and two together. "So when you and Kaylens went to see Lupin..."

"He turned. Yes."

"Merlin..." Ron whispered, unconsciously rubbing Hermione's back harder.

"Harry I don't understand." She said haltingly, shoving her book away, it's pages flapping lifelessly as it fell to the floor. She spared it not a glance. "Please Harry. What's going on?"

"Too much to explain easily 'Mione."

Ron took Hermione's hand almost naturally. "Then take your time mate. Start from the beginning."

Harry shook his head, hating himself. "Fine, the beginning then..." He steadied himself, and met Hermione's almost pleading gaze.

"You both already know that Voldemort has not given me a moment's peace since last summer. It's a private battle between him and I. Were both fighting for information, about the other side's comings and goings, about how much the other side knows..."

He talked steadily, opening his dresser drawer to put clothing away. His actions, however menial, lent a sense of normality to the otherwise ominous conversation.

"Your parents 'Mione, he said he will release them..." He ignored her intake of breath. "If I tell him what the contents of the prophecy were."

Her expression drooped. "But how could you? It broke..." She glanced at Ron, searching for confirmation, repeating herself now. "You can't know what it said. Could you?"

He found himself nodding. "Yes Hermione. It broke. But I still know what it said."

The silence that followed occupied years within his mind, yet it lasted no more than 3 seconds.

"What did it say?" She questioned cautiously.

He remained silent, until her pleading voice broke again.

"Harry, please..."

"Don't ask me Hermione, not again. It is something I cannot share."

The betrayed looks upon their faces nearly broke his spirit.

Hermione's mouth opened and closed wordlessly. It was Ron who finally gave voice to their thoughts. "Why Harry? Why can't you share it?"

"You would not want to hear it."

"How could we not? Harry this is all we've worked for! Did it say how we can beat him..."

He swallowed hard. "No Ron."

"Then why won't..."

"No."

Ron's voice was hard. "Then if not us, him? It could save 'Mione's..."

The accusation in Ron's voice was too much. He could take no more. "Because I can't Ron! Don't you think I would if I could?"

Ron shook his head. "I don't know anymore Harry..."

Harry was having trouble keeping his voice level. "Ron, if I tell him there is no reason for him to keep the Grangers alive anymore. It's our biggest bargaining chip."

Hermione sounded so small now. "But V-voldemort said he'd...He'd I-let them g-go..."

His jaw dropped. Hermione was smarter than this wasn't she? "I'm sorry Hermione but once I tell him..."

"He'd let them go." Ron interrupted. "Make him release one at least Harry! Then tell him for God's sakes! What could it hurt! Bargain with him!"

Harry lost his patience. "Don't you guys get it! This is Voldemort we are talking about!" They both cringed at the name, his voice rising. "This isn't some war game were playing against the Slytherins! This is real life! Voldemort is eviler than either of you can even imagine..."

"Really?" Ron countered. "Were we or were we not there with you Harry? Huh? Did we not see what he was capable of at the Department of Mysteries?"

Harry shook his head, never more serious. "No Ron. You didn't." He felt almost sorry at Ron's crestfallen look. "You only saw what Death Eaters were capable of. That is nothing compared to him."

"Harry then why don't you just tell us how he..." Hermione started miserably.

"Because Hermione! There's no way to explain it..."

"There's no need to yell at her mate." Ron said coolly.

He laughed bitterly. "Oh but there is Ron. Because after everything we've been through you'd think you would both trust my judgment on this..."

"No." Ron squeezed Hermione's hand and stood. "Because we remember where your judgment got Sirius."

Harry felt as if his insides had frozen. There was no arguing this.

"If you had only listened to Hermione it wouldn't have happened." Ron continued icily. "And now your hesitation concerning this prophecy may get her parents killed as well."

Hermione had begun tugging on his hand frantically. "Ron..."

"No Hermione. He needs to hear this. Because it's like he doesn't even trust us..."

"I do trust you..." Harry whispered.

Ron's eyebrows raised so far they disappeared beneath his hair. "Really! Then why did you hardly breath a word to us all summer? Why won't you talk to us now?"

"I am talking..."

"No. Your blocking Harry. Like in chess." Ron pointed his wand out the door, summoning the chess board from the common room. Levitating it, Ron cleared the board save for the pawns, king, and queen of both sides, his brow furrowed in concentration. He then moved the pawns so they protectively surrounded the king and queen on one side, leaving the other side's king and queen unprotected.

"The way I see it Harry, all you have left are pawns." Ron continued, gesturing to the protected side of the board. "So instead of risking everything to take my king, you're protecting yours."

Ron moved a pawn on Harry's side away. "You're afraid that if you move your pawns for a second, that I might get in and take your king."

Ron's queen shot forward, moving through the opening Harry's pawn had left, taking his queen out with a violent whack of her chair. She then stood, posed to take his king on the next move.

"The king represents everything your keeping from us Harry." He continued seriously. "You won't let your king be taken, because if that happens..."

The chess board folded in on itself, slamming to the floor.

"Game over."

Harry shook his head, unable to deny Ron's accusation.

He was right. And for the first time Harry realized how truly different he was from them.

He loved them, but Ron and Hermione could never share his burden, no matter how much they wanted to.

The sound of the metaphorical wall falling between them filled his mind, and Ron spoke again.

"Game over Harry. Only you're the only one who knows what game were playing."

Harry tromped through the corridor, feeling worse than he had thought possible. He preferred feeling numb, at least then he felt nothing at all.

They simply did not understand. Not that he had expected them to. Things were too dangerous now. Voldemort had made a hobby out of extinguishing anyone close to his heart, and he was not about to fill Ron and Hermione's heads with anything that might make them more tempting targets than they already were.

Which was why he had flat out refused to divulge anything else, and held his ground about not revealing the prophecy to Voldemort. Not even for Hermione...

Ron had stormed out telling him to 'keep his secrets' and Hermione had plead with him to 'not shut them out.'

The choice was no longer his.

No longer would they be privy to Harry Potter's bad decisions.

They wouldn't end up like Sirius.

He knew exactly where he was going, and rounded the corner to the hospital wing. His foul mood only increased when Madam Pomfrey stuck out her head, a forced smile plastered upon it, and asked him to wait.

The door slammed and the sound of argument resumed. Dumbledore's voice caught his attention. What was he doing in the hospital wing? Perhaps to see Kaylens, but he had already visited them once. It wasn't like the Headmaster to visit students though. And he should know, he had been in the hospital wing too many times to count, but could count Dumbledore's visits there on one hand.

A disturbing thought struck him. What if Kaylens had gotten worse?

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the extendable ear he had taken to carrying at all times. His decision made he slipped it beneath the door.

Madam Pomfrey's reproving tone came out clearly. "...cells need to regenerate before you can even attempt to perform magic again."

"But I'm behind enough as it is!" Kaylens... A twisting wave of relief washed through him. And to think, normally he had trouble resisting the urge to mute her...

Dumbledore spoke now. "Miss Kaylens I don't think Remus would want you over-exerting..."

"Well I'm not particularly concerned with what he thinks at the moment."

The silence was palpable, and he shifted nervously. She was okay, now that he knew this he really shouldn't be listening...

Yet something about Dumbledore's tone made him. As outwardly honest as the Headmaster had been with him lately, his faith in the man was still recovering. It had been shattered too skillfully the previous year.

"Kalliandra, we did not want you burdened with this."

"Considering that I'm the one you can't cure, don't you think that should have been my decision?"

Cure? His stomach lurched dangerously.

"Kalliandra, looking at it as a death sentence will not help matters."

Her voice was strained. "Your right. Nothing will. You know that the odds..."

"Are only as good as you make them." Dumbledore finished. "That is precisely why we did not want to burden you with this."

"I'd prefer the burden." Kaylens hissed, her voice suddenly stronger. "Now is there anything else your keeping from me?" Her voice was strained and accusatory. "Because I'd like to know before I read about it in some stupid book."

Silence.

"I thought so."

His entire body shook unsteadily. So much so that the approaching footsteps did not register until the door had swung open in front of him, revealing a pale looking Kalliandra.

He could only stare, words abandoning him. Her eyes had caught on the extendable ear.

Her garment bag slipped down on her shoulder, her entire form quivering.

"Potter..." She whispered chokingly. She locked eyes with him, her expression stunned.

A second later she was gone. The glistening of her eyes the harshest reproach he had ever seen.

"Just as courage imperils life, fear protects it."
Leonardo da Vinci

Chapter 17 Kunnskap

Kunnskap is Norweigan for Knowledge

She shoved open the entrance doors, leaving the secure halls of the school behind, and walked out onto the rapidly cooling grounds. She blinked back the moisture that lingered within her eyes. No tears would fall, no matter how hard they threatened. This she promised herself.

She was furious, but her anger paled in comparison to her self loathing. She had been so unbelievably stupid! It had been bad enough to trust Remus, but to have nearly let down that barrier again...

"Damn't Potter!" She swore quietly.

Despite the pain they had been in, the time spent within the hospital wing had been pleasant. She and Potter had dwelt in silent companionship, both knowing there were things that needed to be discussed. Despite that he had not pressed her to talk, instead he had seemed to calmly accept her silence.

This change had been oddly comforting.

At least until she had stormed out, to find him standing there with an extendable ear.

She kicked the ground , scattering dirt in her wake.

She could not fathom why she had thought he would let her keep her secrets. But she had been a complete fool for entertaining the notion.

And for some reason his small betrayal hurt her.

Gods... She turned her tear filled eyes towards the sky, tracing along the darkening clouds, and noted how low they hung. It was the

incoming storm that had drawn her outdoors after all. The strange feeling slithering through her, as if static electricity were tickling her very skin, had been hard to ignore.

She reveled in the small distraction from her thoughts, and allowed herself to simply feel.

The looming clouds pulsed with unstable vibrations, their rhythmic throbbing pulsed within her very blood, and her hair stood on end as if one had just run a balloon through her hair.

The storm front rolled in above her, and the more astute of her peers began to head indoors. The area surrounding the lake had been the first of the grounds to be abandoned, and her feet led her there.

She wanted the seclusion.

She had grown so used to despair, to feeling only constant numbness, punctuated by bouts of undiluted anger, that she had forgotten how to feel something as human as fear.

Everything had happened so fast the day she had received the shopkeepers note, and there had been no time for the cold truth to sink in. Only over the past days, as she and Potter had lain there in silence, had it finally registered.

Pomfrey's words had just driven it home.

Somehow, hearing the Healer's words had made it real, and now fear held her heart in a vice grip.

Despite the fear, she felt oddly detached, each aching step reminding her how she had already nearly died from her stout with the werewolf.

Perhaps death would be a blessing. She just had things to do before it found her.

The vibrations in the high sky were back, and she cringed at the electricity there. Being a part of such things, feeling such things, was not always pleasant.

It was often painful.

She rubbed her arms against the chill wind, thankful that God had some sense of pity. Fortunately for her, the human brain could only register pain as abnormal for so long, before it accepted the pain as the constant state of affairs. Then it would be ignored.

Oddly enough, it was very similar to how the fragrant scent of roses would lessen, if one were to stand amongst them, breathing them in for too long.

Still, acclimation could only do so much, and her body ached, protesting constantly.

Instead of leaving the grounds at the threat of rain, she continued meandering across the grounds, walking the circumference of the lake, observing it carefully.

She took it all in with her normal perceptiveness. There were spots where the grounds ended, dropping off sharply to meet the duckweed covered surface of the water.

In other spots the ground gradually sloped down, kissing the lake's rippling waves. There the dark earth was muddied, imprinted with the footprints of those who had braved the shallows to swim, before the weather had cooled in wake of the incoming afternoon storm.

She passed by both these areas, heading closer to the Forbidden Forest. Here she kicked off her shoes, allowing them to dangle freely from one hand as she picked her way across the far end of the lake. Here small stones formed a natural beach, and she sat down near the edge, letting her fingers trail across the rough pebbled edges beneath her.

She accumulated a small collection of flat bottomed rocks, gathering them within her hands, and she cast the first across the serene water, breaking it's glassy surface.

The giant squid lazily reached out a tentacle, swatting at and missing the cast stone.

She smiled ruefully, casting another towards him. This time the tentacle swung and connected, sending the stone flying high above her head.

A low rumble filled the sky, and the altocumulus clouds dipped threateningly lower, wafting the scent of rain upon the breeze towards her. The sky had grown darker, and she vaguely remembered the afternoons she and Sean had once spent, skipping stones across the lake near their family home.

But there had been no giant squid to play with there.

She skipped another.

A fleshy pink tentacle connected with it, hurtling it back.

To the side of her came an unmistakable grunt.

Harry winced, rubbing his forehead. That was definitely going to leave a mark.

It had taken him all of thirty seconds to decide to follow her. The memory of her watery eyes had been alarming, and he couldn't let her leave like that, not when she didn't understand.

He cast a glare at the giant squid, approaching her cautiously, carefully trying to not slip upon the slick rocks as he walked down towards her.

He treaded as close as he dared, pausing to hover uncertainly. Her shoulders had stiffened at his outcry, the only sign to indicate that she was aware of his presence.

He swallowed hard. From where he stood besides her, he could see the drawn line of her lips, and how her eyes gazed, almost longingly

across the dark surface of the lake. He followed her gaze, the first drops of rain drizzling upon them.

The lake's once glossy exterior now moved with a life of its own. Each raindrop sending circular ripples outwards, each disturbance merging with the other furrows spreading across its surface. The effect was entrancing, and he drew his eyes away from the scene before him, to the girl before him. She was why he had ventured out here, despite the threatening storm.

"What are you doing out here?" He asked carefully. Another rock of thunder shuddered the sky, drowning him out, and the giant squid disappeared beneath the lake's surface.

"Enjoying the sunshine." Her hair fluttered lightly around her face. "I thought it would be obvious."

"It's not." He responded, the wind carrying his voice.

Silence reigned for some time, broken only by the increasing rhythm of rain, pattering around them. The water gradually matted his unruly hair to his forehead, and Kaylen's golden hair darkened with saturation.

She sat with a relaxed air, unbothered by the icy droplets pouring down. Slowly, with evident pain in her movements, she scooted closer to the lake's edge, dipping her feet into the churning water as casually as if it were a mid-summer day, rather than a windy October downpour. Never once did she look at him.

Her shoulders were bare, and her damp hair clung to them. He was close enough to notice the slight goose bumps prickling across her pale skin.

The conversation he had overheard forced its way to the forefront of his mind as he watched her shiver.

Kaylen was sick...

"Here." He said, shattering their verbal lapse. He picked his way across the pebbly decline to her, shrugging out of his cloak. He felt no awkwardness as he picked up her damp hair, draping it across her shoulders.

She looked up, turning her questioning gaze towards him. He was at a loss, for the glossiness of her eyes could not be from rain water alone.

"You'll er... Well your soaked..."

Her eyes held his, and for the most fleeting of seconds the suspicion he was so used to seeing vanished. "Thank you." She murmured, inclining her head to the spot besides her.

He lowered himself besides her, afraid to speak. His heart pounded loudly in his chest, never before had he been so fearful of reprimand. His luck may have lasted thus far, but even he would not blame her for screaming if she so chose.

For once he could admit to deserving it, and her silent acceptance of his presence was unnerving.

The sky thundered, lighting up as lightning flashed high in the clouds. It struck him as extremely unwise to be in their positions, so close to water.

"We should go in." His voice lacked conviction.

With the back of her wrist she rubbed the water from her eyes.

"Well?" Above the rumbling overhead he could tell she was speaking louder. Though the difference was barely discernable.

"Well what?"

"I doubt you came here out of concern for my well being." She said, staring resolutely across the lake.

He opened his mouth to explain that that was exactly why he had come, but she went on.

"And since there are no conversations going on for you to listen to, I'm wondering what your doing here." Another flash of lightning illuminated her soaked features, and he found himself drawn towards her serene expression, confounded by her words.

Despite their content, her tone held no trace of the familiar sarcasm or malice.

Instead she sounded curious.

The realization sent an out of place smile across his face.

"Kaylens, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"I came to apologize."

To his surprise, she actually laughed. The sound had a haunting quality to it, for it blended artfully with the wind howling around them. The storm had crept upon them fast.

"Your right." She said, shaking her wet hair out in vain. "I don't."

He seized the opportunity to keep her talking. "Well I am. Kaylens I..."

"How much did you hear?" Her gaze turned pointedly down.

He sighed in frustration. "Enough to know that you shouldn't be out in this downpour."

She nodded, closing her eyes as if pained. "You have no idea how wrong you are."

He frowned. "I would if you just talked to me."

The look she shot him could silence the devil himself. "And why should I? You haven't been the portrait of honesty Potter."

"Perhaps if you would just listen you would find out."

She did not answer. Instead, she tilted her face towards the sky, allowing the rain to pour over her more freely. Her hair fell away from her shoulders, revealing her long neck. She remained this way for what may have been mere seconds, but to him, felt like hours.

"Okay Potter." She finally breathed. "Try me."

Such was his astonishment that for once, he did not hesitate.

And he explained.

He explained how he had followed her that day in Diagon Alley, how her stubborn refusal to answer questions about Death Eaters had led him, to what he hoped, were wrong assumptions, and how, after days of watching her in a comatose state, he had feared that she had fallen ill once again.

He spoke to her, the rain cascading down their bodies as they sat, keeping each other's acquaintance, the storm forgotten. Several times she made to move, shaking her head disbelievingly, but his hand on her arm silenced her refutes. By the time he was done, a sad expression had crossed her features.

He studied her, puzzled. "Look, Kaylens I didn't mean to upset you if..."

She shivered noticeably, shaking her sopping hair. "No, it's not that Potter..." She trailed off, showing no intent of finishing.

He swallowed hard. God he just wanted things to be okay between them. There was still so much to talk about...

"Kaylens are..."

Her expression darkened at his words, and she stood abruptly, her shivering more pronounced.

"We should go in." She stated, interrupting him.

He nodded disappointedly, noting that the storm showed no sign of relenting soon, and stood with her. He already felt bad that they had stayed out there so long.

The second he was up she unceremoniously shoved his cloak back into his arms. He looked at it in surprise, and was about to argue, noting how far a walk to the school it still was, when he realized that she had already spun and taken off into the downpour.

"Wait..." He called, utterly confused. He stumbled after her, slipping on the wet rocks, and caught up to her on the grass.

"Kaylens keep it. You'll freeze otherwise." He went to drape it across her shoulders but she brushed him off.

"I'm fine..." She said grimacing. "Really." She added, seeing his disbelieving look.

He matched her stride determinedly, noticing the reemergence of her stubborn streak, and threw it around her anyway. "Kaylens if your sick your wearing this until were inside. I don't care..."

She whorled on him, looking disturbingly distressed, her skin dangerously pale. "Look, Potter... Do yourself a favor okay? Don't worry about me."

He found himself shaking, be it from the cold or the icy palor of her skin, he did not know, yet all thoughts of speech were driven away.

It was as if she were transforming before him. Her icy barriers that he had not even noticed to be missing before, were coming back. What had he done to cause this? A few seconds ago they had been on almost civil terms.

The thought of her hating him again churned his stomach. He couldn't allow it...

She was backing away from him. "In fact..." She continued, sounding like a frightened animal. "For your own good, just stay the hell away from me."

She took off, leaving him standing there stunned, his sopping wet cloak on the muddied ground.

Over the past few days, since Kaylens had left him standing there in the pouring rain, Harry's mood had not improved.

He just did not understand what he had done, and every time he caught a glimpse of her he felt sick.

Everytime he had seen her, she had been with Draco Malfoy...

The fact that he still had a sneaking suspicion that she was clueless as to what a Death Eater was did not help matters.

It was enough for him to nearly send curses flying. At Luna's insistence, he had taken to kicking suits of armor instead.

Apparently the metallic noise made by kicking something attracted Crumple Horned Snorkacks.

Or something like that.

His reaction was puzzling, even to him. He could not deny that he felt oddly protective of her. How could he not? He had spent far too much time watching over her in the hospital wing, and the thought of further harm coming to her drove him mad.

Perhaps that was why he felt so crushed now that the fragile rapport he had, for a few exhilarating moments, thought they had built, had shattered.

But still... He could not fathom what it was he had said wrong. All he knew was that she was no longer openly hostile towards him. Instead she avoided him like the plague.

He had seen her alone that very morning, and it had taken all his patience to avoid hexing her into next week when she had practically sprinted down the hall to talk to Dean, upon catching sight of him.

Hell, he had come damn near closer to hexing her and Malfoy in Defense Against the Dark Arts that very day. He had walked in to find her and Malfoy chatting in hushed whispers, bent over parchment.

The second he had come within earshot the parchment had been rolled up and stuffed hastily into Malfoy's book satchel.

Kaylens had refused to look at him. But he had not failed to notice how her hands shook for the rest of class.

It had been easy to notice since he had been sitting alone. Ron and Hermione had holed themselves up on the other side of the room. And unlike Kaylens and Hermione, who contented themselves to avoiding him, Ron had made sport of sending hostile glares his way.

At least the hostile looks from his roommates were understandable. He had had another violent dream with Voldemort that week, and had woken up in a right state, screaming at every one of them.

Even the suits of armor had taken to cursing him when he walked by. Apparently they didn't like attracting afore mentioned snorkacks.

Come to think of it, the only person talking to him now seemed to be Luna. And since she was in the year below him, he found himself sitting alone in classes, and eating lunch at the Ravenclaw table.

In short, the week had passed by in a dizzying haze.

Fortunately it would soon be over. Luna had already expressed her intent to get his mind off of things, and was planning on forcibly dragging him to Hogsmeade.

He actually didn't mind the idea.

He finally reached the door, and Crusantheus surprisingly opened without complaint, revealing Dumbledore's office. He stepped in for his lessons, removing his wand in preparation.

"That will be unnecessary today Harry." Dumbledore said, catching sight of him from behind his desk.

Perhaps it was because his thoughts had been elsewhere, but the idea of a wandless Occlumency lesson caught him off guard. He furrowed his brow questioningly.

Dumbledore caught the unspoken question. "Tonight, I have something different planned. Besides, I have taught you all I can regarding Occlumency Harry. The rest is up to you."

Somehow Harry strongly disagreed with this. If he had learned all there was to know about Occlumency, he would not still be having violent nightmares. "Professor, in all due respect, if I had actually learned everything wouldn't I be well...good at this then?"

Dumbledore cracked a smile. "Ah, you see Harry, therein lies the difference. You have learned all I have to teach about Occlumency. That is an entirely different matter from mastering the discipline."

Harry was stunned, all previous thoughts and irritation at the Professor driven from his mind.

Never in his life would he have imagined Dumbledore being unable to teach him something.

"Occlumency, Harry, is less about erecting mental barriers, and more about controlling one's emotions. Keeping your emotions hidden from the enemy is of extreme importance. And frankly, gets easier with age." Dumbledore stood with a rather large feather duster and began to attack a disgruntled portrait with it.

"Harry, you have become quite adept at creating barriers, visualizing a brick wall is your barrier of choice is it not?" Harry nodded but

Dumbledore was continuing. "But the only way to strengthen that wall at this point, is to learn to mask your emotions."

Harry stared somewhat unabashedly as the previous headmistress made a rather crude hand gesture.

"Er... Professor?" He questioned hesitantly. "What exactly do you mean by 'masking' them?"

"Ah, not explaining myself very well am I?"

He valued his education far too much to respond truthfully.

"Well Harry, when one sifts through your mind, painful memories can get unearthed. It's natural to recall the emotions these experiences caused you. Such a distraction is all the enemy would need to delve deeper into your mind." Dumbledore was carrying on with all the air of one discussing a weekend outing. "And you have no shortage of painful memories Harry. It would be quite easy for Voldemort to find one to use against you."

He did not need Dumbledore to tell him that, he had already re-lived the guilt of Sirius' death all summer.

"So are you going to make me relive those memories for practice?" He asked, somewhat apprehensive.

Dumbledore turned to look at him, balancing precariously on the stool he was using to reach Phinneas' portrait. "Why of course not. Certainly, I could go sifting about through your mind, forcing you to recall bad times in your life. But dredging up old memories and forcing you to deal with them would only help you build up indifference. We don't want that."

Dumbledore turned back and shoved the feather duster right where Phinneas' face had just re-appeared. The former headmaster cringed and jumped out of the frame again.

"Harry, what we do want, is for you to come to terms with the crueler parts of your past. And only you can define what those terms are. But

I dare remind you, there is a difference between allowing the past to remind you, and allowing the past to control you."

Dumbledore jumped down from the stool, wiping his dusty hands on his robes. "Well now that's done. Now I have something to show you."

He beckoned him to where he stood, withdrawing a worn, leather bound book from one of his shelves. "You know, I almost lost this after that squabble yourself, Mr. Weasley, and Ms. Kaylens had the other day Harry." He peered down his spectacles at him. "I trust that is now resolved?"

Harry found himself oddly stuttering. "S-sort of..."

Dumbledore shrugged. "Well, give it time, give it time. It may take her awhile to open up to anyone, seeing as how matters are."

The Headmaster was running his wand up and down the spine of the book in an odd zig-zag pattern, muttering something about mothballs. A loud 'pop' was heard, making Harry jump, and the book sprang out of Dumbledore's hands, falling open on the table before them.

"Now this Harry, is something you will not have seen, nor heard of before."

Harry had to admit that Dumbledore was dead on.

Inside the open book, where the pages should have been, lay a pink layer of fog. There was a sense of depth to the interior of it, and Harry had the vague sense that another dimension lay just beyond the peacefully swirls.

Dumbledore reached his hand into it. "It is a rather clever hiding spot for things. Not only is the locking mechanism for it rather tricky, but only a hand with my DNA could reach into this and still find their hand attached."

Harry had been unconsciously leaning forward, trying to peer through the fog, but at this pronouncement took a step back. Dumbledore's

hand fished around blindly for a few minutes, before emerging with a silvery chain. A small vial was attached to the end of it.

The Headmaster shut the book, muttering a few charms, and replaced it upon the shelf. "This is something that I have been wanting to give you for quite some time Harry. But until recently, the opportunity had not presented itself. The fact that it had not, is entirely my fault, and for that I am sorry."

The Headmaster, indeed, truly looked sorry. In fact he was looking rather grave all of a sudden. "Ever since the day that cursed prophecy was made Harry, myself and a few others have been working on this. I still feel that it is woefully inadequate, but for now, it is all I can give you."

At this pronouncement, Dumbledore handed the vial over. Harry took it with no small amount of trepidation. The vial, Harry found, was surprisingly warm

"The vial you now hold is a special form of pensieve, Harry." Dumbledore said by way of explanation. "It is called a Kunnskap. It means knowledge. And unlike normal pensieves, it does not have an unlimited capacity. It can only contain a select few memories, and I believe that there are 81 different lessons contained within this one."

Only eighty-one? He thought, slightly amused by the Headmasters definition of only. He turned the vial within his hands, noting that unlike in Dumbledore's pensieve, blue specs darted to and fro within the silvery substance here, colliding frequently to emit dark green sparks. It was like watching the reflection of fireworks in a silvery pond, only on a miniature scale.

A thought occurred to him.

"What do you mean by lessons, Professor?" He asked curiously.

"I was just getting to that." Dumbledore replied, looking strained. "But given the danger that you have been in ever since that cursed prophecy was made, I wanted to have a way of preserving, and passing on, knowledge of certain spells to you."

The Headmaster paused, shutting the leather volume. Whisps of curling pink tendrils snuck out around the edges as he placed it back upon the shelf.

"Times were dark." He continued gravely. "I did not know how many of us would survive, but we knew it was essential to pass on our knowledge to the next generation. This was our way of ensuring that at least one good wizard recieved that if the worst were to happen."

Such a glum pronouncement chilled him, for in admitting that he had once prepared for the worst, Dumbledore had admitted to his own mortality.

Despite his irritation and anger at all the Headmaster had withheld over the years, the thought of a mortal Dumbledore shook his concept of a stable universe.

The Headmaster motioned Harry into a plush plum armchair, oblivious to his pupil's dark thoughts.

"Over the years, myself, and others within the old Order, added select pieces of knowledge that we wanted to depart to you, to this. You'll even find some of my old school day lessons there. Things like apparition, curse-breaking, animagus studies... They are all in there."

Harry listened intently, not wanting to miss a word. The conversation had become oddly personal.

A house elf popped into existence then, extending a plate of biscuits to him. He scarcely managed to take one, for his mind was fixated on the cruel irony of the situation.

This vial was a true gift, yet he was only receiving it because of the prophecy's heavy burden.

Suddenly he felt rather blunt. "Professor, you made this to help me figuer out how to defeat Voldemort, didn't you?"

Dumbledore smiled sadly, sipping the tea that had materialized. "We made it, because we still have hope."

Hope... Why couldn't someone else have been wizarding kind's hope?

Dumbledore was mercifully oblivious to the dark thoughts still flitting through his mind.

"Harry, the Kunnskap does not work like a normal pensieve. Instead of entering a memory, the memory enters you. So once you unearth one, it's knowledge will remain permanently yours."

This piqued his interest. "So you mean that I can become an animagus just by looking at the memory in it?"

Dumbledore smiled ruefully. "No. This will teach you the theory, and knowing the theory of something is entirely different from putting it to use. However..." The man's blue eyes twinkled mischievously. "I have it on good word that learning and researching just the theory on animagi can take years. So all you will have left to do is practice putting what this will teach you, into use."

Thinking of what he, Ron, and Hermione had planned, he suddenly wondered, for the thousandth time since coming to Hogwarts, just how much that the Headmaster knew about his students.

Against his better judgment, he broke out into a small smile. Even Hermione, with all her convictions against taking short cuts to learn something, would probably die for a look into this thing.

God he would miss them... Perhaps one day, when things were different...

As if reading his thoughts, Dumbledore smiled. "For the time being Harry, I would keep this to yourself. Because of the Kunnskap's potential for misuse, only seven were made. We would not want this falling into the wrong hands."

Harry was taken aback. For once, Dumbledore was actually trusting him with something important. "T-thanks Professor. I'll look after it."

He'd be damned if he disappointed him.

Dumbledore smiled over his cup. "I'm sure you will Harry. Do try to use it in private though. When one uses it they tend to appear in a trance, and I would hate to see what your roommates would do if they stumbled upon you in such a state. And I would know, Mrs. Norris once caught me using this."

Harry nearly choked on his biscuit.

The past fortnight, he realized, had truly been full of surprises.

"Choose to be not a product of your environment, nor of your experience, but a product of what your heart tells you the world can be in it's finest hour."

A.K. Lovell

Chapter 18 The Scars Life Leaves

Tonks threw open the shades, allowing the bright afternoon light to stream in, filling the room with yellow hues so bright that not even Remus, who was valiantly feigning sleep, could ignore them.

She marched to the side of his bed, throwing open the bed hangings.

"Get up." She clipped, her expression anything but amused.

"How did you get past the wards?" Remus groaned, pulling his pillow over his head so he resembled a burrowing animal.

She contented herself to narrowing her violet eyes. "Bill's a curse breaker. And when he and I have over two weeks with nothing to do but crack the wards on our stubborn arse of a friend's home we tend to succeed."

Remus emitted a low grumbling sound, indecipherable to any human ear. It was at this point that she decided she had had enough. She ripped the covers from his bed, and flung them out the now open window.

"Remus did you really think you could avoid us forever!" She hollered. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

At his lack of responsiveness she stomped her foot angrily, and began spraying him with water from the tip of her wand.

Remus jerked so violently that he rolled right out of bed, landing in a heap on the floor. He blinked groggily, his face scrunched up and dripping. He looked extremely disgruntled.

"You look like a sopping wet dog Remus! Now get your stubborn ass off the floor right now and get ready! We have an Order meeting in an

hour and if you are not there so help me Merlin I will come back here, wards be damned, and make you come! You can't avoid us forever!"

He groaned unhappily.

She glowered down, deciding to not leave just yet. "And you know what else Wolfy? You are the singularly, most selfish individual that I have ever met!"

"Mrmph..."

"Don't mrmph at me!" She practically shouted. "As if it's not bad enough for you to stay here, wallowing in self pity for two weeks, but you left me to talk to Harry for you! He deserved to see you there! Not me! Instead you hid here away from everyone acting like a baby!"

"Go. Away." He interjected moodily.

"NO I WON'T!" She screeched in a very un-Tonks-like fashion. "I am FAR from being DONE! I haven't even started on Kalliandra! Do you have any idea how much she probably needs you right now?"

He apparently had found something fascinating underneath the bed, because now he had taken to staring beneath it.

"She doesn't need me. I nearly got her killed."

Tonks stomped again, very near his head. "You know that wasn't your fault Remus! No one knew what that spell would do!"

"You should go." He mumbled morosely. "I could still turn at any moment."

Her jaw dropped. "Is that what this self-induced isolation has been about? You think your going to turn again?"

When he didn't answer she actually laughed. "Remus you prat! You turned within an hour of being hit with that spell! Do you really think that it could possibly turn you again? Two weeks later no less?"

"I can't risk it..."

"Well that's just too damn bad Wolfy because your going to." She didn't wait for a response and marched over to throw open his closet. She grabbed the nearest shirt and threw it at him. "Now go shower and get dressed. I don't have all day and so help me you are going to write to Harry and Kalliandra before we leave!"

He could be seen over his bed, fumbling with his shirt. "When we leave? Wasn't I kicking you out now?"

"I'd like to see you try. I'm not leaving because I don't feel like fighting with your wards again." She paused, and almost as an afterthought added, "And don't change the subject because you are writing to them!"

He shook his head, his shaggy hair falling around his eyes messily. It looked like he hadn't showered in days. "No. If they wanted to talk to me they would have..."

"Would have what?" She was far beyond losing her patience at this point. "Contacted you? Remus, Kalliandra tried! That damn pocket watch of yours has been glowing all week at headquarters! We tried sending it back to you but you keep sending it back! Kalliandra probably thinks your ignoring her by now and Harry..."

"Harry is safer if I stay away." Remus interjected, picking up his wand.

She growled in frustration and yanked the pocket watch out of her pocket. Mundungus had found it near one of the dead children after the attack.

"Well at least take this back Remus." She said, placing it on his worn desk. "I don't care what you say but she really does need you." She searched him for some sign that he accepted this fact, but he only leaned out the window and summoned his blanket back up.

Watching his pitiable movements, she suddenly felt like collapsing.

Remus had been the one she could count on, to hold together for her. Ever since Sirius...

She couldn't bear to think of it, let alone voice it, but ever since that wretched night she had grown to rely on Remus. She needed him so much it scared her.

It had been his cool, light brown eyes she had awoken to in St. Mungos. The healers said he had never left her side. Even then he refused, and took to sleeping on a make-shift cot in the corner of her room. He had claimed it was to not miss the fun of her griping, whenever the healers had poked and prodded her with their wands, but she had known better. He had been worried, and who could blame him when she had never felt worse.

But his presence had kept her thoughts from straying to Sirius.

She shuddered, remembering how he had found her curled up on her couch one night that summer, positively balling her eyes out, the few pictures of Sirius she had spread out on her coffee table. If only she had stunned Bellatrix when she had had the chance! By Merlin he would still be here!

With a cool cup of mocha Remus had sat with her, logically reminding her that hindsight is 20/20, and of the futility of blaming herself.

Catching the bastards was the only thing that could help Sirius now, he had told her. And as an auror, that would be her job. He had told her how she needed to hold together for that.

If he had not shown up when he had, she may have curled up in the nearest, damp broom closet, and not come out till Christmas.

She had passed out that night, vaguely suspicious that her mocha had been laced with dull firewhiskey. Remus always had claimed that alcohol assuaged the nerves...

She had only just realized how grateful she was for the small traces of humor he shared with her.

She had grown so used to him always being there, and it had taken Remus' absence to make her realize how much he meant to her.

Never again, did she want to experience another fortnight like the one she had just had without him.

The thought of him wallowing in self pity any longer made her physically ill, and she felt her shallow reserves of strength folding in.

She had to resist the urge to run over there and smack him.

She drew herself up, ignoring the pain prickling in her chest. "Harry does need you Remus." She started. "Your all he has left. Imagine how he'd feel if you shut him off now?"

Remus was flipping the comforter back onto the bed, straightening it meticulously. "He doesn't need me. Neither does Kally. They'll just wind up hurt..."

"Well damn't Remus! I need you!" She shot out, ignoring his shocked stare. "Don't you get that? I miss you! And I'm not the only one! Harry misses you! He sent me an owl because you haven't responded to his letters! I can only assume by that pile on your desk that you haven't read any of them yet! And you! You're just..."

She trailed off, frustration effectively silencing that train of thought.

"Go shower. I'll wait downstairs."

She turned in a huff and stormed out, resolving to send Harry and Kalliandra separate notes demanding that they pester Remus until he broke out of this self-created shell.

She missed the disbelieving eyes of a certain werewolf, following her longingly.

Harry allowed the book to fall closed. His head had long since fallen upon the table, his body slumped over in frustration. A thousand and

one dark curses swirled through his mind, their counter curses eluding his memory in a maddening way.

Why, in the name of Merlin, had Professor Tres been so against teaching them this?

The sheer enormity of the task before him had hit home nearly an hour before, and the constant weight on his shoulders seemed determined to crush him now. It was pressing down on his chest, making his head spin, the realization of how little time he had to master this had finally sunk in.

Voldemort could come for those he loved tomorrow, and somehow he doubted the monster's minions would stick to simple jinxes.

For the first time in his life, he was starting to feel helpless. He had borrowed the book from Dumbledore's office, changing the cover so no one could know what dark arts it contained, and after only a few days of study he had come to a realization.

Avada Kedarva was amongst the most merciful of dark curses.

For the dark arts could do so much worse than simply kill in one blow.

The could burn you alive from the inside out, your screams confounding those around you, your skin not blackening as invisible fiery tendrils licked at you hungrily.

By the time those around you realized...

Help for victims of the mort ardente would be far too late.

Other curses could slice your skin in slow, long slashes. The invisible attack lasting for hours, as medi-wizards and healers tried to save you, only to watch you succumb as slash after destroying slash undid their healing, spilling your life blood, killing you...

Others could slowly crush your chest, driving the air from your lungs, suffocating you under the pressure of a dozen hippogriffs...

He shuddered involuntarily, almost glad that death had been quick and merciful for Sirius and Cedric. He had not known before, but their lives could have been extinguished in much worse ways...

The school system had failed them. Harry knew this now. For they had not prepared them adequately for what they might face in the war.

Professor Tres had shown him that merely a week ago. Kaylens had been the one to bring it up, asking when they would learn the worse of the Dark Arts themselves.

He hadn't been sure whether to applaud her for her astuteness, or curse her for sounding like fanatical Malfoy.

But she had been right...

If one did not know what the curses sounded like, how could they defend themselves with accurate counter-curses?

So while her and Malfoy had argued their point, and lost valiantly as Tres started twitching under pressure, he had composed a letter to Dumbledore asking for access to materials about the Dark Arts. Dumbledore had granted him that...

He propped himself on his elbows, reopening the ancient, blackened leather text. He was determined to learn every lethal curse the world had to offer him.

And before he found Voldemort with them, he would first find Pettigrew...

The man who had stolen his life from day one.

Pettigrew would pay. Harry would make him feel all of the pain he had felt ever since his arrival on the Dursley's doorstep.

Then Pettigrew would die.

Then, once he had seen what the curses did on a live human, then he would find Voldemort.

The creature was going to pay.

Kalliandra clutched Tonks' letter in hand and stormed to the foot of the gargoyle.

She had done exactly as Tonks had requested. She had already tried contacting him. She had tried saying, shouting, and cursing his name into that blasted compact of hers, had sent owls armed with letters and orders to peck at his hands until he replied, and even had sent a self-writing quill with the last one so it would write whatever he said down upon receiving it.

That particular owl had had orders to snatch whatever was written before Remus had a chance to snatch it up himself.

Well apparently Remus had been too quick for the owl, because she had gotten back a broken quill and a ripped, blank piece of paper.

Damn your stubbornness to Hades Remus! She thought in annoyance, stomping her foot outside Dumbledore's office.

She had grown so annoyed with him avoiding contact and canceling their tutoring sessions that she had finally slipped on Riley's ring and tried port keying directly to Remus, only that hadn't worked either.

Which was precisely why she found herself outside of Dumbledore's stupid stone gargoyle, shouting every candy that came to mind.

"Peppermint! Bat dung droppings! Bertie Pops! Apples! Peaches!" She exclaimed at it, abandoning candies in favor of fruits. "Oh damn it to hell! Peach Schnapps! Peach Cobble..."

The stone gargoyle had sprung to life, allowing her entrance.

"Peach Schnapps? You've got to be kidding me..." She muttered, springing up the stairs and bursting into his office, being careful to smack Crusantheus on the way in.

Dumbledore looked up idly from his desk, a bemused expression across his weather worn face. "Why Kalliandra, what a pleasant surprise."

She did not agree. "Professor what does Remus think he is doing?" She demanded, stopping in front of his desk. "He can't avoid us forever! Why doesn't my port key work anymore? And why are you now using liquors as your passwords?"

Dumbledore looked rather puzzled. "Peach Schnapps? A liquor? And here I thought it was a rather clever form of candy..."

Had she not been so worked up she would have rolled her eyes. "No, it's not. But why won't this work..." She held up her ring for effect.

"Ah, I was wondering when you would ask." Dumbledore commented airily. "Remus requested that your port key be de-activated for the time being."

She glowered. "Did he say why?"

"I am sure you know why Kalliandra."

An odd, sinking feeling had wormed its way into her stomach. "Yeah, I think I do. But doesn't he understand that it wasn't his fault?"

"On some level, yes. But much like someone else you know..." Dumbledore eyed her shrewdly, leaving no question about who he was referring to. "He has taken to blaming himself, shoving away those close to him in order to protect them."

She sighed defeatedly. "So there's nothing we can do to talk some sense into him?"

"I rather think, that this is something he has to come to accept on his own terms. We cannot force him into realizing that we would rather be near him with all of the risks, than away from him and safe."

"I wish we could..." She said sadly.

Dumbledore chuckled slightly, recognizing the irony of her statement. "You know Kalliandra, in our own way, we are all a danger to those we love, for the simple fact that true friends will go to any lengths to help each other, even if that means sacrificing their own lives in exchange for another's."

His words struck a deep chord within her, one she was not quite ready to hear. "Thanks Professor..." She muttered, all anger gone. "Can you at least give him this when you see him?" She extended a letter to him, it's addressee reading To The Obstinate Wolf.

Dumbledore smiled, "I'll see that he gets it."

Harry rested his cheek against the worn surface of the table, letting his dank hair drip over his face. The dripping water from his recent shower eased the dull ache that had begun in his scar.

Drip...

A bead of wax broke free from the glowing candle, falling to soak into the unsealed ridges of the oak desk. The impact sounded cavernous, for his ear remained pressed against the desk's surface, amplifying the sound ten fold.

Across the common room, far from where he sheltered in the shadows of a single candle wick, the fire glowed warmly. Several straggling seventh years, no doubt putting in the extra hours for NEWT preparation, remained there, blissfully oblivious to the late hour.

Sleep would once again, not be his companion. When his scar ached so sharply, it was in fact the enemy.

Voldemort was there, just beneath the surface of his mind, waiting for a chance to get in as he dreamt. He knew Hermione's parents were as good as dead, but he would not allow Voldemort the information he demanded for their supposed 'release.'

If they were going to die, it would not be in vain.

Fiery shadows danced across his open text, and he wearily rubbed his scar, trying to memorize the counter curse for one of the many crushing hexes.

The one he was looking at would drive air from the lungs slowly, till the person could only claw at their neck in agony, blood vessels in their eyes bursting as oxygen left them.

The black and white illustration showed a wizard captured in a silent howl, his fingers already falling limp around his throat.

He shuddered at the sight, not noticing the determined expression flitting across her face.

He had never even noticed her studying him, concealed as she was, lying on the floor across the room, warming herself before the fire.

She made her way towards him, making up her mind.

"Hey Potter."

Her voice pulled him away from his thoughts, and he swallowed hard, looking up as she slid into the seat before him. She leaned backwards relaxingly, her face falling into the shadows of the corner they sheltered in.

"Kaylens." He said steadily, heart hammering. Be it at her sudden interruption or the memory of the dying face, he did not know. "What are you doing here?" He slid a hand across the morbid photograph, staring intently at her.

She met his eyes, for the first time in days, holding them seriously. "Talking Potter. Just talking." Candlelight danced in them...

His scar gave a dull pound, reminding him of his own fragile state. Tonight was not the time for talking, even with her, whom he had grown curious about. "You know..." He stated carefully, watching her

smooth her sleek locks behind her ears. "There is usually a reason for why someone sits clear across a relatively empty room from everyone else."

She nodded, a whimsical frown tracing her features. "Oh? And what's that?"

"Their studying."

"Or they want to be left alone." She whispered, voicing his unspoken thought. "Believe me Potter, I know your unhappy with me. I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important."

He was thrown. "I'm not unhappy with you." He said quietly, before he could stop himself. "I just don't understand why your so hostile."

Her eyes danced in the candlelight, her hands playing around the base of the candle, picking at the solidified wax. "It's not important why. I just am." She whispered, sounding clearly pained.

He nodded, accepting this. "If that's the case, then am I, or am I not, supposed to stay the hell away from you?"

She chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully, fidgeting. "For someone who seemed eager to talk, your certainly making this difficult."

He smiled forcefully at this, probably looking like a grim clown. "And that has nothing to do with you storming off, then refusing to come within a ten meter vicinity of me?"

"Touché." She murmured. "But this isn't about you or me. It's about Remus."

Her voice held an essence of loss as Lupin's name fell off her lips, and for a fleeting second he understood. He did not know how the two knew one another, and felt the stabbing pain of betrayal that Lupin had kept better communications with her rather than him, his best friend's son, but in that instant, he knew that his former Professor had not spoken to her since that day either.

He felt oddly good about that. For a change, he was not the only one being ignored, or kept in the dark.

"Won't respond to any of your letters either then?" He queried, knowing the answer.

She shook her head, her hair coming loose from where it lay tucked behind her ears, falling to lay artfully over her eyes. "He's started sending mine back."

He felt a small grin tugging at the edges of his lips. "Hedwig is persistent."

"An owl?"

He grunted in response, the ache in his scar was starting to burn slightly.

"We can't just let Remus shut himself off."

He jolted forward, dropping his head into his hands to cover the painful grimace now crossing his face. "Funny hearing you say that." He groaned as the first wave of pain attacked him. "Because isn't that what your doing?"

Through his fingers he saw a shrewd expression cross her face. "Do you want me to get Madam Pomfrey?"

"Why..." Picture the wall...The bricks...Their rough texture stretching infinitely upwards... "Why would I want you to get the nurse?" He asked, barely guising the pain that was now coming forth in waves. She needed to leave. She needed to leave now, but not to get the nurse...

"Your in pain Potter. I'll be..."

Before she could even move his hand had shot out like a lightning bolt, attaching itself to her wrist. "Don't get her... I'll be fine." He hissed lowly, not keen to attract the attention of the seventh years still down there.

An unpleasant sensation swept through him, the feel of Kaylens' wrist turning barely registered as the dark room spun. He was no longer fully there as his eyes flickered half shut, half seeing the wall Dumbledore had taught him to so carefully construct, half seeing Kaylens kneeling down besides him.

"The only way to strengthen your wall at this point, is to learn to mask your emotions..." Dumbledore's words came back to him...

"Potter? Potter look at me." Kaylens spoke quickly, an unfamiliar edge to her voice. He waved her away, feeling her hands wrapping around his own. She had to leave...

Voldemort was prickling at the edges of his envisioned wall.

The creature's voice filled his mind, green tendrils leaking through red brick.

Been sssstudying the dark artssss I sssssee. It'ssss about time you learrrrned...

He turned his eyes away from his book, leaning away from Kaylens to slam it shut before Voldemort could learn more.

"Sodding hell Potter of all the times..." Kaylens murmured. He felt her arm sliding beneath his shoulders, a strange tingling trickling through him as he unconsciously leaned closer, allowing his body to sag against her as she hauled him up.

He rose his eyes, finding her own surprisingly close, flickering with that unfamiliar concern. "Kaylens leave..." He muttered, feeling a violent edge forming within his last coherent thoughts. He had nearly attacked Ron in a similar state, under Voldemort's egging influence...

Ah compannnnny... Voldemort sounded almost cheerful, and Harry felt his face unwillingly turning towards her further.

Suddenly it was no longer he who was searching her features.

Interesssstinnng...

"Kaylens..." He gasped. "Get the hell out of here."

She grimaced determinedly, kicking open the portrait door. He heard her shouting something about Pomfrey to someone, but their form was so blurry... He couldn't make them out...

It doesssssn't matterrrrrr who they arrrrre Harrrrrry. Who issss ssssssheeeee...

"Leave..." He groaned, barely shoving the words out. She was dragging him down the hall now...

"Potter I'm not going anywhere." She got out, sounding strained.

It'ssss good to know they have not messssed up assss badly assss believvvvved...

Who messed up? He thought, grasping lucidity, desperate to glean Voldemort's meaning.

Calling on his last ounces of mental reserves he dug his heels into the ground. He turned, squirming away from the reassuring presence of her arms, suddenly finding his own feet untrustworthy.

He was collapsing to the stone floor, the torch lit halls a brilliant blur...

Whooooo...

Unable to tell the difference between speaking and thinking, his mouth opened to scream his own question into the dead of night...

Kaylens hand clamped over his lips, and he found himself breathing in her skin, damp with perspiration and the waxy essence of the candle she had been fidgeting with mere moments before.

"Damn you Potter be quiet!" She hissed dangerously.

He struggled dazedly, her chin coming to rest on his shoulder as she stilled him, frantic hushing sounds escaping her own lips. Had she had a harsh edge to her? He could no longer remember...

Jussssst a name Harrrrrrry... What harrrrm everrrr came frrrrom a name Harrrry...

He relaxed, leaning against her again, feeling her arms stiffen. Of course... It only made sense... Voldemort would want to know of someone as fascinating as her, who wouldn't? He certainly did, no matter how infuriating she grew he was curious. What harm could a name do...

"Kalliandra Kaylens..." He murmured druggedly.

"Glad to see you remember formalities. Now please get up, I'm not strong enough to drag..."

A jubilant wave washed over him, so intense as to drown out every other word filtering through his auditory system.

Voldemort withdrew as quickly as he came, and he realized, with a sinking feeling, that he had just given the Dark Lord something he very much wanted, without realizing it.

The feel of Kaylens' hands tugging up on his shoulders, the feel of her long hair brushing against his face as she leaned over him, the dark shadows of the deserted Hogwarts corridor...

The sanctity of his mind restored, it all came into stark focus.

His legs becoming his own again, he powerfully thrust them into the floor on his own accord, scrambling eagerly away, his sudden departure sending her spilling across the cold, dirt dusted stone floors.

He rounded on her downed form, failing to notice her shocked expression. One thought was on his mind. One he had been putting off asking.

"What does Voldemort want with you?" He asked pointedly, the maniacal glint that always accompanied Voldemort's touch still in his eyes.

She glared up unflinchingly, golden hair limply splayed out across her face. "So were at this again are we?" She whispered, brushing it aside, revealing the steely glint of her own glossy orbs.

"Yes." He said seriously, his hand lingering near his wand. "Yes we are."

She pushed herself up, slowly, wincing as she did so. "Does that really require an answer then?"

"Yes."

They stared at one another, both expressions unreadable.

Finally, an eternity passing them by, she tilted her head to the side. "How much do you know?" She whispered.

"Enough to know he was all too happy to learn your name tonight." He knew the consequences of this, if horrible, would be his to bear. It was not a thought he cherished, and a part of him almost wished for her to profess into the night her loyalty to the Dark Lord, so he could strike her down, guilt free.

Yet another, taking in the way her left hand shook ever so slightly, declared him the fool for not going to her to fix what he might have done.

This last thought was silenced by the way her eyes darkened coldly onto him. "And you were happy to give him that information. Weren't you Potter?"

His own hands, now balled in fists, shook with suppressed rage at himself for doing so. "None of this would have happened if you had just listened to me. Why didn't you leave when I told you to?"

She shrugged one shoulder, almost testingly, in an out of place manner. "You looked like you were having a fit Potter. I thought you needed the hospital wing..."

"Whether I need the hospital wing is none of your CONCERN!" He hissed angrily, albeit too loudly. Someone was bound to hear, but he didn't care. Let Filch just try and punish him...

She looked stricken by his words. "I see." She whispered, moving to walk past him, back towards where the Fat Lady's portrait observed in awed horror.

Once again, before he could stop himself, he had her wrist in his hands, spinning her around to pin her against the wall. He pressed his body against hers, their faces dangerously close. Her face remained an unreadable mask, save for the beads of perspiration glistening upon her forehead in the torchlight.

They stared at one another, each daring the other to speak. Releasing one of her wrists, he moved his hand to rest above her shoulder, cutting off any thought of her escape.

"I said I understood Potter." Her breath was barely a whisper, and beneath his palm he felt her wrist cooling, the cool October air prickling goose bumps across her arms.

"No..." He said quietly. "I don't think you do. Not really..."

She breathed in deeply, her chest rising to press against his own for the briefest of seconds. "Care to enlighten me?"

He nodded coldly, his moist hair falling to conceal his scar, a disturbing sizzling sound drawing Kaylens eyes uncomfortably towards it.

Her challenging demeanor vanished, confusion flickering in her eyes. Her free hand unconsciously reached upwards, but he stilled her motion by aggressively squeezing her shoulder blade.

"I wouldn't... recommend... doing... that..." He said coldly, ignoring how she bit her lip, her face clearly contorted in pain. If she couldn't take that what in the hell did she plan on doing when Voldemort got to her. He'd teach her what she was dealing with...

"Do you have any idea what your dealing with? I have a suspicion..." He spoke mechanically, as if lecturing a small child. "That you do not. So I am going to ask you one...more...time. What...does...he...want...with...you?"

She tilted her head up to his slightly. "What makes you think that he wants anything with me at all?"

He smiled cruelly. "Let's just say we have ways of chatting."

Her eyes instantly narrowed, her body tensing beneath his. "Are you saying your involved with him?"

"Perceptive..." He murmured coldly, leaning in till her breath breezed across his face. "But I never said friendly. You on the other hand openly admitted it."

"Lies..." She spat.

He could no longer tell if she were glaring or crying, for his forehead was pressed firmly against her own, driving her harder against the wall. Her words lingered on his unshaven chin, and he grimaced wryly, realizing how close he was to finding out the truth.

"I have news for you." He whispered. "You said you would rather be a Death Eater than be like me. So you either are one of his followers, or you are clueless as to what a Death Eater is. Now which is it?"

Her expression remained unfaltering for far too long for his tastes.

"Fine." He whispered. "Here is what I think. I think that you have no clue what one is. Either that, or you are the best actress I have ever seen. But for that to be true, you would either have to be a Muggle, which you clearly are not, or you would have to have been a recluse

from wizarding society. So..." He tilted his face down, practically meeting her own.

"Which one is it?" He breathed, tension reverberating in the still hall's air.

She turned her wrist in the confines of his loose grip, her skin brushing against his own. He could precipitate her reactions, being so close, his eyes locked onto hers. She was going to run, it was like feeling what she was feeling... Fear...

Suddenly he knew what was occurring, why her body was shuddering ever so slightly in front of his own. He stared into her eyes for a moment longer, allowing his expression to soften misleadingly.

"Well if you don't want to tell me..." He murmured, releasing her wrist before she could bolt. She eyed him with surprise, and mistrust, never seeing his hand falling to rest upon his wand.

"Legilimency." He whispered.

Her life... It all flooded his mind in one overpowering wave. A swirl of events that were impossible to discern... Until one scream filled his mind with a blinding red hue, bringing it all into stark clarity.

"RILEY!"

The swirl of images changed, becoming the congruent picture of a blond child, hair much lighter than he knew it would darken to become, was approaching a door, answering it...

A man smiled toothily down, removing his hat to reveal closely cropped, dirty blond hair, bowing slightly. The child smiled upwards, but the image of his smile froze, faltering, as if it had forever been burned into her memory.

And now his...

The door flew open, the man's foot connecting with it, sending it bulleting inwards, hitting her with it against the face. Blinding pain

kept her conscious, for the world was black be-speckled, and her screaming form fell to land in the front foyer.

The guilt... Almost overpowering... She shouldn't have screamed... My God if only she had not...

A golden haired man, only slightly older than they were now, came sliding into the hall. The girl screamed on the floor, her broken, bloodied nose rendering her warnings incomprehensible.

The blond haired monster dropped a knee onto the girl's back, pinning her to the floor. The flash of a buck knife drawn from a casing caught Harry's eye, and the young man, who now bore a look of the utmost fury.

"Wanna go boy? Come here!"

The golden haired man was already charging, but the monster had drawn a gun and fired before Riley could even reach her...

Riley... My God, Harry thought...

Her mistake... The guilt... If only she hadn't screamed.

The girl was bucking on the floor, screaming, nearly freezing in fear as blood pooled from Riley's chest wound, his eighteen year old body twitching spasmodically, his mouth gaping, gasping for breath...

Yet Riley had crawled, leaving a smeared trail of crimson death on the linoleum floor in his wake, for he had been unable to let his little sister be pillaged...

His dying breath came, the girl's eyes wide with horror for only her brother, as the buck knife plunged into young Kaylens', deep into the back of her eight year old shoulder blade.

Hot, fiery pain intensified, followed by a tingling sensation of the most curious kind...

He could almost feel what she had... Her shoulder was tingling, little pin pricks attacking her skin as they would when her foot would wake up from falling asleep...

Her hysterical screams only intensified, and Harry watched in horror as the monster gripped her hair, yanking her head back roughly as Harry once himself had done to her, before slamming her face savagely into the linoleum.

"Were going to have some fun aren't we little girl? Aren't we! Just as soon as you shut your bloody mouth and tell me where that sweet little brother of yours is..."

"Go away!" Little Kaylens was screaming her heart out.

In Voldemort's mind he had seen adults wither in pain and fall apart at so much less...

His heart broke as he watched her small form continue struggling, screaming, yet the man only pinned her face down to the floor harder, dragging the buck knife across her shoulder in a long, cruel line...

A swirl of colors, and he was gone. Thrust out not by magic, but by the savage grip someone had taken up on the back of his robes, yanking him away from her. He staggered backwards, disoriented, his arm flailed into the torch holder...

His sleeve was on fire, burning him, the flames licking up his sleeve when someone floored him, dousing him with water.

His charred skin throbbed, but not so much as his mind.

Kaylens stood motionless, still pressed against the wall, chalk white, silent tears streaming down her beautiful face. A single slender hand was clutching her shoulder. The same one he had grabbed roughly. The same one he had seen stabbed viciously...

It was as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"K-kaylens..." He whispered shakily, pleadingly.

"Shut it Harry!"

Harry rolled over to see Ron and Hermione, returning from nightly Prefect rounds, glaring hatefully down at him.

"The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic."

Joseph Stalin

Chapter 19 Le Règne d'Enfer Commence

Once his mind awakened, his wits dimmed by the drugged wine he had willfully taken, it was not the darkness, nor his unfamiliar surroundings, nor even the cloaked figure patiently waiting besides him that he noticed.

It was the stale air.

He sniffed.

They were coming...

Just as he had.

It was why he had isolated himself for the past fortnight. From Harry, from Kally, from Tonks...

Lucius Malfoy had not given up on recruiting him. After all, there were only so many pureblood werewolves.

Two days after the incident with Kally and Harry, he had received a blank envelope addressed to him, sealed with the Dark Mark.

After reading it's contents, it's offer of safe haven from the cruel, prejudiced Ministry standing in cruel contrast to the Death Eater's own prejudicial beliefs, Dumbledore had asked the one thing of him that he had felt unable to do.

He had asked him to consider joining them.

He had stayed in isolation, not wanting his affections for Harry, Kally, or Tonks, especially Tonks, to sway his decision.

The other werewolves began emerging from the underground corridors surrounding him. Here the walls were lined with bone.

Femurs rising up like sadistic pillars from hell, supporting the long line of skulls outlining the subversive passages. Cool water dripped rhythmically from the damp ceiling, wetting his sweating scalp.

There was only one place in the world that flaunted such morbidity. Deep beneath the streets of Paris, over sixty million of a time long past lay dead. Their skeletons disassembled, grouped systematically to form walkways, a remnant of a darker time.

Upon drinking the drugged wine, the Death Eater had said he would awaken in the Empire of Death. Only now did he understand what he had meant.

A heart shape, shaped out of human skulls, lay set into the walls of the Paris catacombs besides him. A standing remnant of the macabre sense of humor, stretching endlessly into the darkness.

This was a prefect place of meeting. Public, isolated, and gothic.

Not to mention how winding the corridors were. It was doubtful that anyone would be there to witness their dealings.

"After our last meeting I must admit that I am surprised to see you here."

Lucius Malfoy stepped forth from a shadowed corridor, dropping his hood to reveal white blond hair.

He inclined his head. "Since then I've realized how my kind is rewarded for good deeds." He replied resolutely.

Lucius gave him an appraising look, before reaching forth a cloaked hand to beckon the others forward. Half a dozen other cloaked figures emerged from the shadows, forming a circle around him.

"Who's the gaunt one?" Growled one of them. Remus distinctly saw the glint of fang beneath the hood.

My God... It is true...

Voldemort had truly found a way to control their transformations.

Werewolves could now roam the world at will.

"The gaunt one..." Lucius said sneeringly. "Is a pathetic excuse of a pureblood, friend of the Potters..."

"Former friend." Remus interrupted nastily, snarling for effect. "I've seen how their sort repays my kind, thinking I'd betray them because of what I..."

"Spaaaaaare us the speech wolf." Interrupted the one who had brought him there. "What we need to know is if we can trust you."

"Of course we can't." Lucius snarled, threateningly extending his incisors and nails. "But we can make him one of us."

"If you don't trust me how do you plan on accomplishing that?" Remus countered, not wanting to sound too eager.

Lucius smiled evilly. "I'm so glad you asked." He withdrew a silver flask from his pocket, tossing it to him.

Remus caught it with his shirt sleeve, uneager to come in contact with the forbidden metal.

"Tsk, ts. Not too trusting are we blood traitor?" Lucius chided.

"Not really."

"It's platinum. Wouldn't want to be carrying around something deadly now would we? Remember, I share the same curse as you."

Remus scoffed. "By choice."

"Ahh... Still looking at it as a burden rather than the power it is?"

"You said you'd give me a reason to think of it otherwise."

"That I did. Now drink it." Malfoy ordered.

He eyed the solid flask distastefully, uncorking it to sniff. "What's in it?"

The Death Eater that had brought him there smirked. "You drank the other substance without question."

Remus shrugged. "Your not about to kill a potential ally before you have time to try and turn them now are you?"

Lucius laughed. "Always the shrewd one."

"It keeps me alive."

"So. It. Does." He said coldly. "That substance..." Lucius indicated the flask. "Will assure that you are one of us. But once you drink it, there is no going back."

Remus eyed him with distrust. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that you will gain the ability, like most of us here, to transform at will. The moon will no longer hold it's power over you."

He watched Lucius pacing down the damp corridor, rubbing his pale fingers along the rough bones. "And?"

Lucius halted. "Once it's drunk, you will know what the taste of human flesh feels like." His pale eyes shone with a homicidal gleam. "They say once you know that, there is no going back. You will crave it forever. Your precious Mudblood lovers will never accept you back once you desire the taste of meat."

Remus felt his insides run cold. Now there was a catch neither Dumbledore nor himself had thought of. It was too perfect really. They didn't trust him, and they would give him something that would make him crave human flesh so much that he was bound to join their side, regardless of his intentions upon first coming there.

"I told you." Snarled a woman's voice. She must have seen his hesitation, smelt his fear. "It was a mistake bringing him here."

Remus knew what he had to do. He only hoped his will was strong enough to never cave.

He turned to the unnamed witch, smirking as evilly as possible. "The only mistake was not seeing what those Ministry bastards have kept from me my whole life."

He felt the air thicken with tension.

"And what's that?" Nott spat from besides him.

Remus curled his lips back, tilting the flask to his lips, chugging it down. Liquid fire flowed through his veins, energizing him, changing his molecular make up...

A delicious, tantalizing taste filled his mouth, leaking over his tongue, overwhelming his senses so that he nearly lost himself to it.

Reigning the hunger in, feeling the power his kind had always been meant to feel, rather than the pain, Remus met their gazes, his own teeth elongating. He was as changed as they were now. One of Voldemort's mutated creatures, even if he were internally against them.

Only now he understood what power it was to be the beast he was, even as his consciousness screamed out the consequences, his hunger beckoned.

He tilted his head back and howled.

Lucius stepped forward, a wolf like snarl on his face. "Welcome..."

"Brethren."

The rain hammered down, darkening the tombstones. A small girl was crouched besides one, sheltering beneath the comforting

dryness of her star speckled umbrella, her braids flapping lightly in the wind. The resemblance to her mother was striking.

Watching the child kneel, Tonks barely restrained her own tears.

Emily Bothan had just asked her mother to come home soon. She missed her bedtime fairy tales. While she told her mother's slab of stone this, Emily meticulously arranged, then rearranged, the flowers in the bouquet her father and her had brought.

Mummy only deserved the best.

Emily has said so herself, when she had spent the better part of an hour searching the floral boutique, seeking out the perfect arrangement of irises and hydrangeas. Mummies favorites.

Tonks sniffled, allowing the light breeze to inconspicuously dry her eyes.

"You saved my daughter's life." He said, finally speaking. "And for that, I owe you mine."

The thin line of Kenneth Bothan's lips gave away his carefully hidden despair. He was a man of private mourning.

"No Mr. President, if any..."

"Kenneth. Please." He implored, his dark eyes never leaving the small form of his daughter. "If anyone has earned the right to dispense with formalities it is you."

Tonks smiled sadly, not agreeing. The fiasco had been entirely her fault. Her own incompetence leading to why his young wife, his high school sweetheart, lay beneath his daughter's small feet. "If anything Kenneth, your daughter saved mine. She has the bravery of one three times her age."

"Like her mother." He whispered, looking loving upon his little girl, who was now recanting the events of her week into the grass.

One day, Tonks realized, the loss would hit Emily. But for right now, she was grateful that the child could still smile for her father's sake.

Because when she looked at Kenneth, she could tell he needed his little girl to remain just that. She prayed to God that Emily would never show the scars of what she had gone through.

"It's such a shame..." Kenneth remarked, gesturing to his daughter, drawing her from her thoughts. "That it takes something like this to happen, before wizards will let someone know of their existence, or of any danger from them."

She paused thoughtfully. "You were a history major. I trust that you are familiar with the Salem witch trials."

President Bothan nodded. "Yes."

She smiled ruefully. "That's why. Were afraid of what Muggles would do to us. Even we can fall victim to guns."

Kenneth Bothan sighed. "Part of me understands. But it still saddens me." His brow wrinkled, pain etched in every line. "All the misunderstanding between both our kinds... Had I only known before hand I would never have let Emily's party occur. We could have remained inside. My family would have been better protected."

"They still would have found you." She spoke truthfully. "When the monster we spoke of wants to hurt someone, he will, no matter what the obstacle or cost."

Kenneth nodded sadly. "I suppose I knew that. Hindsight is 20/20."

The rain was letting up, a soft scent wafting towards them. One that had nothing to do with the flowers speckling the lonely cemetery.

Irises...

Kenneth tilted his head to the sky, breathing deeply. Sometime in the future, he would swear to Tonks that sometimes, like right then, that he could still smell her favorite flowers in the breeze.

Watching him now, Tonks was thankful the Order had granted her and several other members permission to remain with him and his daughter as a rotating guard.

They would be needing it.

Harry hung his head over the butterbeer, not hearing a word Luna said. He had tuned her out when she had started talking animatedly about the special edition of the Quibbler that week, the one concerning how Cornelius Fudge's army of Heliopaths had drowned in a freak toilet flood accident in the Department of Mysteries.

The gentle chime of bells drew his attention to the door of the Three Broomsticks, just in time to see Kaylens, Dean, and Neville walk in, their hair windswept from the rough fall breeze that day.

He instantly looked back down into his mug, not wanting to have a repeat of their latest confrontation.

He didn't know what the hell he had been thinking, violating her like that.

That was just it. He hadn't been thinking. He had been suffering the familiar after effects of Voldemort invading his thoughts, and those included everything from temporary insanity to violence.

Needless to say, forcibly getting the information he wanted out of her had seemed like a good idea at the time.

Hermione and Ron had seen the entire thing, turning the corner right as he shoved Kaylens against the wall, hissing "Legilimens". Mione had gone on a tirade about their being no excuse for such violation of personal privacy, and him running after Kaylens' hadn't helped.

Particularly when he grabbed her again, desperately trying to stop her, to make her understand that he had not been in his right mind, only to find out that she had a rather nasty right hook.

"Harry why don't you just apologize."

Luna's voice got through to him, and he turned a startled face to her. "What do you mean?" He asked, feigning stupidity.

Luna smiled, looking at something just over his head intently. "If you like her, apologize. It's as simple as that."

His jaw dropped, flabbergasted. "What?" Embarrassed by the odd stares they were now receiving from his outcry, he lowered his voice. "Luna I don't like her. I just feel bad becau... Wait a minute? How did you know I had something to apologize for?"

Luna's expression changed, her normally dreamy countenance gone, if only for a second. She looked like she was about to lecture a small child. "Every time we've seen her recently she hasn't glared, she just pretends your not there. She stated simply. "Before you both took every chance to be at each others throats."

Luna's dreamy demeanor returned, and she opened her purse, withdrawing a lime green straw. "Plus she just walked in, and now your staring into your butterbeer. You used to watch her you know. Or didn't you?" She looked up, puzzlement gracing her face. "With you it's hard to tell what you are or are not aware of."

Before Harry even had a chance to marvel at her astuteness, Luna had begun asking what kind of eulogy a Heliopath would like at it's funeral.

"I wonder if their flames go out when they die? If not then their burial methods would have to differ from our own, since they would burn right through their casket..."

"I guess you'll have to get a hold of one of their bodies to find out." He commented cynically.

Luna looked scandalized. Indeed, she was shaking her long, dirty blond hair with such vigor that it knocked over her drink. She didn't seem to notice.

"Oh no Harry." She said very seriously. "Daddy would never disrespect one of their bodies. Just because their a different species doesn't mean they should be less entitled to proper mourning."

He was so distracted by the absurd turn of conversation that he failed to notice Ginny until she dropped down next to Luna, grinning from ear to ear.

"So Harry, I heard Ron gave you detention." She commented mischievously, giving Luna a quick one armed hug. "Shocking isn't it? Considering how he's never exactly been the model Prefect."

Harry nodded miserably, longing for a return to the Heliopath conversation. Anything was better than talking about this again.

Luna nodded absentmindedly. "Harry was just thinking of apologizing to that... Well what would you call her hair color?" Luna seemed to ponder this for a second before shaking out her own dirty blonde mane. "Fourteen carat I suppose. But I think Harry's having a hard time getting up the nerve to talk to her."

Harry gaped. Since when had he been considering doing that? And her hair was golden, not...

He suddenly realized what he had been arguing with himself about, and hung his head.

Ginny shot him a sympathetic look. "Can't say I blame you. How's the eye by the way?"

His head shot back up instantly. Was there anyone who didn't know about that?

"Don't worry Harry. The only ones who know are us three, Kally, Dean, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Seamus." Ginny said, ticking them off her fingers. "No one would have found out if that git of a brother of mine hadn't blabbed."

Harry fought the urge to kick something.

The table leg was saved by Seamus' arrival. He had been getting butterbeer for himself and Ginny. "Heya Harry."

He grunted in response.

Seamus chuckled, brushing his sandy bangs from his eyes. "Heard Kaylens decked yaaaRH!"

Seamus' yell of pain was preceded by a loud THUNK from beneath the table, and a scolding look from Ginny.

His Irish housemate was rubbing his shin rigorously. "Sorry... Couldn't resist ya know? Dean and I have had this running point system between you twooOW! Will you stop that Ginny?"

Harry shot her a grateful look, to which she inclined her smirking head.

By this point Luna's ever-present dreamy look had once again vanished, for she was clutching her stomach with laughter, pounding a fist on the table, making quite a scene as she ceased to restrain her laughter.

"So glad my life's entertained everyone this week..." He muttered hollowly.

He spent the rest of the conversation sneaking surreptitious looks across the relatively empty pub at Kaylens. Dean and Neville seemed to be debating something, and he thought he caught the words 'bloody thesteral' more than once, while Kaylens stirred her butterbeer, sipping it through a straw like Luna, looking for all the world as if she were not listening to a single word her companions were saying.

He jumped, clearly startled when Ginny leaned down next to him, balancing on his shoulder. He hadn't even noticed Seamus get up.

"I'm not sure what's going on between you and Ron, but the git will come around, and everything will be okay." She said this so quietly

only he heard. "Just remember, I'm not just his little sister, I'm yours too."

She squeezed his shoulder lightly, re-joining Seamus, where he patiently had been waiting several feet away, just far enough to have given her the privacy she had requested.

She linked arms with Finnigan, and a warm feeling billowed up inside him at her reassuring words. She was right, maybe not right now, but when this was all over things would be okay.

He watched her wink over her shoulder before sauntering out into the blistering wind, her red hair swirling around like a wild tornado.

He smiled stupidly.

He had a little sister... Regardless of what Ron currently thought.

The thought was comforting, and he hailed Madam Rosmereta's new waitress, a small, happy looking brunette, over.

There was nothing he could or would do about Ron and Hermione. At least not right now.

But a new resolve to fix the things he had legitimately screwed up had been awakened. It would be hard, and he would probably wind up getting decked again, but it was worth a shot.

Luna smiled knowingly, humming Weasley is our King far too loudly for anyone's taste but his. Except at the moment he thought it should be more along the lines of Weasley is our Queen.

Drip.

A single droplet, clinging to the earthen ceiling of the catacomb, broke free.

"It's time."

Plunk.

Remus caught the raw slab of meat that was thrown his way, not sickened as the four other werewolves with him dug in, watery blood dripping down their humanoid chins.

"Dig in Wolf boy. You're going to need your strength for this." Nott chided.

He eyed Nott with distaste. He preferred Wolfy, only from Tonks' lips.

He let her name fade, giving in to the irresistible craving he had been fighting since dawn. Ever since he had drank that cursed potion...

It was a craving for blood that would not go away, and for the dozenth time that day, he extended his canine fangs.

Only now he was using them to tear the proffered flesh, instead of just practicing his transformations, hoping Dumbledore could concoct a cure for this horrid craving he would now deal with.

His eyes rolled black, the pleasurable taste consuming him

For a moment, the only thing that mattered was the meat in hand. The thought of protecting the innocents later on, forgotten.

Drip.

Now the blood dripped from his mouth as well.

Kally sighed exhaustedly, wishing for the solitude of her dormitory. At least there she could kick and scream, venting without the prying eyes of others following her every move, as Potter seemed to be doing from his seat in the shadowy rear of the pub.

Potter was not someone she wanted to think about right now though.

She relaxed, allowing her elbows to prop herself up. She cast a glance resolutely down the bar's counter, stirring her straw around in her empty, bear-sized, mug. It was a nervous habit she had picked up as a child, when she used to twist them into random configurations. It had always been her brother's biggest pet peeve.

"Can't take you anywhere..." Sean smirked, tousling her hair.

She swatted him away, glad to embarrass him in front of his friends.

A sharp nudge caused her elbow to slip, freeing her from that line of thought. She cast an annoyed look at her housemate, ignoring the shooting pain the sudden jarring had sent up her left arm.

"The physical scars, the nerve damage... They are the least of your children's concerns Mr. And Mrs. Kaylens..."

Dean was grinning lopsidedly back, ignorant to where her thoughts had been, taking her back nearly a decade. They hadn't known she was listening when they had spoken to the hospital's psychiatrist. But in their defense, her anesthesia had been heavy.

They had not been expected her to be waking up so soon.

"You look like your off in your own little world there Kaylens. I didn't drag you forcibly out of the castle for nothing today, so being a mute will just not do." Dean said cockily.

If possible, Dean's grin had grown even more crooked with his words.

The resemblance his smile had to Sean's was striking.

Perhaps that was why she put up with him, while she distanced herself from all others, save for Remus. Dean was not Sean, but just seeing such similarity in another human was oddly comforting. It did not hurt like she had expected it to.

Seeing him looking at her expectantly, she shrugged, knowing full well he was about to start prodding Neville. Dean was someone who

seemed to think that it was his personal mission to make everyone around him laugh, and her stony silence was probably pushing him to the brink of insanity.

"Well look at this Nev." He commented predictably, nudging Neville so hard that the poor boy almost fell from his stool. "We've got ourselves a mute. I guess that means she can't back talk now can sh..."

"Don't even try it Thomas." She shot out, feeling the corners of her lips tugging up at his persistence. Not only had he been insistent about her needing to chat, but he had adamantly refused to leave the castle for this 'so-called' day of freedom in Hogsmeade, without her.

How Dean had convinced 'I'm-Afraid-of-My-Shadow' Neville to help in that endeavor was beyond her.

In the end, she had gotten sick of Dean's persistence and given in.

The counter vibrated as the Three Broomsticks' waitress magicked three butterbeers to them with a loud thud. The liquid frothed a bit around the edges.

Catching their questioning looks the young witch flashed a dazzling, dimpled smile. "Courtesy of the gentlemen in the back."

She eyed the new butterbeer with a profound sense of distrust, before exchanging glances with Neville and Dean. She spun around on the bar stool, catching sight of the only patrons still in the back of the pub.

No sodding way in hell did he send us this... She thought with no small amount of anger.

After what he had done, any gesture of this sort was insulting.

She snatched up the butterbeer roughly, storming away from the startled Gryffindors towards Potter.

Best to get this over with...

She came to an abrupt halt in front of him, slamming the mug down so hard that the liquid sloshed over the sides, joining the already pooling puddle on his table.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?" She asked angrily, not bothering to keep the contempt from her voice.

The girl with him smiled dazedly, humming some unrecognizable tune, and Kally suppressed the urge to stare her down. But the most infuriating thing was Potter himself.

He looked rather pleased, though she could not deduce why, since she was within half an inch of using the only hex she was capable of on him.

"Buying you a drink." He replied steadily, wiping at the mess she had made with a spare napkin.

"Oh?" She quipped sarcastically. "And why's that? So you could lace it with truth serum and interrogate me in that swarthy pub down the street? I must admit Potter, if that's the case you're losing your touch."

She leaned down till their faces were level, using the table for balance. "After all..." She hissed quietly, ignoring the blonde's expression. "Why drug someone for information when you can just hex it out of them."

Potter continued wiping at the table, unable to meet her eyes.

"SLAM!"

Kally jumped ever so slightly, ignoring Potter's amused expression. She turned an eye on the blonde, who had just slammed her hands down on the table top like an excited four year old. The girl's protrubent blue eyes were now so wide they looked ready to pop out of her skull.

"Harry you wouldn't mind if I excused myself would you?" She said excitedly. "All this tension could attract an Ira, and I want to be in the best spot to see one."

Without waiting for an answer the girl stood, not noticing their identical expressions of bewilderment, and began shoving spare straws into her lime green purse, speaking in a far off voice.

"You can only see one in your peripheral vision you know. It's why daddy hasn't gotten a good picture of one yet, but I'd so love to see one..."

The girl marched off to the other side of the pub, turned to face the wall, and stared blankly at it. Kally caught a few glimpses of pale blue eyes flickering their way, and each time this would happen the blonde girl would grunt unhappily, stamp her foot, and resume staring at the wooden siding as if frustrated.

What the hell was that abo...

"Look Kaylens..."

His intrusion brought her back to the situation at hand, and she narrowed her eyes shrewdly. "Ah your famous line." She whispered harshly. "So which personality do I get today Potter? Because really, this split personality thing is getting to be a bit of a headache."

Potter's eyes rose, meeting her own in a way she had thought the coward incapable of, and for a second his pleased look faltered. He blinked oddly, drawing in a deep, audible breath. "Kaylens..." He said quietly. "I tried to apologize for that once already, and it's a bit hard to explain, but I wasn't exactly myself when I did tha..."

Her eyes widened considerably. "Did it ever occur to you, in that thick skull of yours, that I might not give a damn whether you apologized or not?"

His expression fell, the damp napkin dropping with an audible thump. "After you stormed off that day by the lake, actually, yes. It did occur to me."

Trust him to bring that up, she thought angrily, quick to push back the uprising of shame within herself.

She swallowed hard. "Glad to see your not quite that oblivious Potter." She muttered, forcing her voice icy. "I would think by now that any fabricated apologies would be a mute point."

She felt more than heard him drawing in a deep, frustrated breath. Just like she felt, more than saw him leaning closer to where she stood. "I wasn't lying to you when I said I was sorry for all of those other things Kaylens."

He spoke so seriously, too seriously for someone their age. "And I didn't even get the chance to apologize for the other night..." He continued, his Adam's apple rising rhythmically. "Since I didn't fancy getting decked again, I figured sending you a drink was the best apology I could come up with on short notice. At least the best one that could keep me a safe distance away, while getting you to come over here."

She arched an eyebrow disbelievingly, eyeing the mug a bit too carefully. "Oh? So you thought buying me a drink would make up for that then?" She mused allowed.

He began to shake his head in the negative but she cut him off, the full weight of his insulting, woefully inadequate gesture sinking in.

"Will you just sit with me so I can try and expla..."

Impulsively she snatched up the mug, expelling its contents all over him, a sopping, frothing mess now staining the front of his shirt.

"That's what I think of your pathetic apology." She muttered shakily. "Enjoy."

Harry sat there sputtering. Of all the ways he had seen that possibly playing out, this had not been one of them.

Sitting there, stunned and sopping wet, he felt too shocked to respond effectively.

Instead his eyes fell upon her delicate left hand, hanging limply at her side.

It was shaking.

Inside he felt a horrible, twisting sensation , recalling precisely why her hand shook thus. How could he have failed to notice before?

"That's what I think of your pathetic apology." Kaylens snapped shakily. "Enjoy."

His mouth flapped wordlessly, his words never reaching her ears, for Madame Rosmerta's alarmed cry stole the words from his lips.

"Lara what are yo.." Rosmerta questioned shrilly. Her eyes were fixated in confusion upon the young waitress, the friendly one from whom he had ordered drinks earlier.

The same dimpled girl now had her wand drawn, a blank expression drawn upon her features, striking a horrifying similarity to a porcelain doll.

"Stupefy!" She hissed mechanically.

As if in slow motion, Rosmerta fell, her limp form disappearing behind the bar's wooden counter. The glass she had been cleaning took flight, hovering in mid-air for a small eternity, before breaking free of it's unearthly suspension, shattering across the counter.

For the first time in it's history, the Three Broomsticks fell silent. Only the howl of the October wind, leaking in through the windows, proved to him that he had not fallen into some horrific silent film.

The gentle chiming of bells broke his attention from where the porcelain girl stood, smiling cruelly down.

Ginny Weasley, floated slowly in, Professor Très following closely, their movements oddly halting.

Hours seemed to have passed, but the clock registered mere seconds.

Seeing Ginny's wand haltingly rise, her movements faltering, as if some invisible force were yanking her arm forcibly up against her will, was what finally broke him free of his slow motion reverie.

His blood ran cold at her blank expression.

"EVERYBODY DOWN!" He shouted, overturning the table. Liquid splattered, and their empty clay mugs had not even struck ground before the first green curse flew from Ginny's wand.

His own already drawn, he screamed a stunner, watching the killing curse miss Ron's dismayed face by inches.

Ginny side stepped easily, and Professor Très turned an eerie eye upon him.

"Kaylens move!" He hollered, but she did not need telling twice. She was already dropping down, covering her head as a slew of wooden shards whizzed by, an onslaught from the now smoldering chair before her.

A stunner grazed his ear, and his body jerked instinctively away from the heat, and in that single second he lost sight of her.

Somewhere in the dim background of his mind the screams of the other patrons began to register.

Less than a foot away from where he stood, a decorative pumpkin exploded, a poorly aimed stunner searing right through it, striking the wall. Stringy orange pulp and seeds erupted, hurtling outwards, covering the floor and himself with slippery orange clumps.

A red light flew from Très' wand, and he dove to the ground, sheltering behind the table as the curse blasted through it. The

screams of other students could be heard, pleading with the Defense Professor.

Très could not hear their pleas, with his ear length hair flung over his eyes, his arm jerkily fired blindly at students, patrons, people...

Grabbing the side of the overturned, round table, Harry heaved it to the side, rolling it with all his strength, scrambling behind it like a rat until it hunkered to a halt. Unable to go any farther, for an unconscious body now blocked its progress, he found the entrance to the bar in sight.

It ran the length of the pub, and Ginny and Très' backs were now to it. If he could just get behind it he'd have safe cover until he was right on them...

He dove for it, leaving the cover of his table behind, rolling across broken chair legs and glass until he came to a crouch behind it.

The waitress was hiding behind it as well, firing curses over the counter.

"Stupefy!" He whispered, letting the red light fly.

Her body went careening to the side, her wand flung from her grasp as she passed out next to Rosmerta's limp form.

He scampered down the length of it, snatching both their wands up, passing wine bottles, clean mugs, and storage areas as he went.

Reaching the end near the shade covered windows, he hastily pocketed the wands in his trousers, leaping to his feet, the disarming spell partially formed on his lips.

His words died there.

The jet of green light erupted from Ginny's wand like a volcano of death, less than an arm's length from where he stood.

Across the room Ron leapt to his feet, abandoning the temporary shelter of a overturned bench to dash to where Hermione and Luna fought unaided.

There was no time to think, to duck, to react.

The green light hit Ron mid-stride, flinging his body backwards against the wall.

Hermione's brown eyes widened, her mouth caught in a strangled, silent wail, and Luna only just pulled her to the ground before the next green spell whizzed by.

Time froze.

All was still.

The blank look of the Imperious curse faltered upon Ginny Weasley's face, unabashed pain replacing it for but a second.

The mask was re-erected, his own wand turning to her, tears of anger streaming down his face at what had been just done to the only brother and sisters he had ever had.

Before the disarming spell could leave his lips, a hard fist collided with his skull, sending the world blurring until it's hellish glory faded to black.

The sound of small feet, pattering in the rain, accompanied Emily's return. The sound of her quiet humming lingered like a breath of fresh air upon Tonks' ears.

The small child stepped out onto the pebbled path, quickly shutting her tiny umbrella before scurrying to huddle beneath Tonks'.

Tonks smiled uncertainly as Emily's tiny hand interlaced with her own. Why Emily was choosing the comfort of her, a stranger, over that of

her father was puzzling to her. Kenneth would later on smile, informing her that she had a lot to learn about how children think.

But for now, Kenneth gave her a small, pained smile, before setting off across the soggy cemetery grass.

She had been right, he was a man of private mourning.

She adjusted the umbrella so the runoff would not drip onto the little princess' head, never noticing the thoughtful look that suddenly passed across Emily's tiny face.

Feeling the insistent tugging on her arm she looked down, two small brown eyes meeting her own. Emily looked rather pensive.

As Tonks inwardly wondered what one should say to a child who has just lost her mother, Emily spoke.

"Your friends are in trouble Nymph."

"Some believe that the benefit of death, is that it is possible to see farther on the other side."

A.K. Lovell

Chapter 20 Nowhere to Run

"Tonksie are you okay?"

Emily's sweet voice carried upon the wind, nearly drowned out by the sound of rain pounding upon the umbrella.

She could only shake her head, shaken as a cool breeze swirled around them. Thankfully such subtleties of expression were lost upon the child, who's head was tilted back, her mouth wide open, catching rain drops.

"The waaaateer's driiiiiippiiii on meeee." Emily gurgled gaily.

Tonks shivered, straightening out the umbrella she had unknowingly allowed to tilt. It had hung so low that a sudden cascade of water had fallen down like Victoria Falls onto young Emily's head.

"Sorry Em..." She gasped out, her voice wavering.

"It's okay I like the rain." Emily declared, darting out from beneath the umbrella, stomping her feet merrily in the collecting puddles. "I like puddles too!"

Tonks blinked in surprise. The child's mother had been drowned in one barely a fortnight ago.

"Your friends are in trouble Nymph."

Emily's sopping wet braids swung about her face, her arms held out as she spun in circles, her head tilted skyward catching the rain.

"Tonksie come play!"

Tonksie... Only Remus called her Nymph.

"My God..." She whispered, her body temperature dropping in a way that had nothing to do with the wind.

Over Emily's twirling figure she could see Kenneth Bothan kneeling in the soggy cemetery grass. His wife's grave lay before him, the carefully placed irises scattering in the heavy wind.

"Kenneth! We have to leave here now!"

Remus' ovular eyes opened upon the worst of sights.

Hogsmeade...

It's empty locale lay before him, dead leaves billowing across the dusty pathway leading through the heart of the village.

Not a soul was in sight.

Ghost town...

It was here Nott and the others had spoken of. It was here the recruiting had been done. It was here where the Death Eaters would make their first stand. Here in the village, so close to the school...

Too close.

It was a Hogsmeade weekend.

"Merlin..." He whispered, staggering, the October breeze biting chilly lines across his skin.

Werewolves had no use for clothing.

Roughly, an unclothed forearm scratched across his chin. Flecks of dried blood flaked away, sprinkling the ground with a sinister looking dust. It's morbidity was a stark reminder of his recently fulfilled thirst.

"Surprised half-breed?"

Instinctually, angrily, his claws extended, breaking his skin with a fiery pain. He did not answer Nott, instead he growled lowly, extending his ears into long points.

The hair sprouting, prickling his pointed ears, brought the deathly quiet village to life. Farther off... In the heart of town... Pleas... Offers of salvation in exchange for allegiances...

"That fool of an old man will never know what hit him." Nott's guttural voice was flooded deep with hate. "Well be here and gone before he even gets out his walker."

Not if I can help it...

Lucius' indecipherable growl cut in, breaking through his angry thoughts, arousing something far darker...

It was time to change.

An unnatural heat filled his veins.

Upon the ground where Remus Lupin had been, now stood a werewolf, the pungent scent of freshly spilled blood inundating it's senses.

The wolf pawed the ground eagerly.

His body, felt like it was being drug across glass. It ached, splintering as individual shards sliced his skin.

Shards... Shards... He tried to grasp onto the word to no avail. It's elusive meaning fled from his pounding skull.

The tight grip on his ankles disappeared, and his feet dropped unceremoniously to the floor. A moment later the reverberations in the floor boards indicated another body being dumped besides him.

Ron...

With a jerk he was awake, the salty tears of anguish tainting his lips.

It couldn't be real. It couldn't have happened. Not again...

He turned his head in a vain search, struggling to make sense of the blurred world before him. A flash of the palest of yellows caught his eye.

Drifting in and out of focus was Luna Lovegood, sitting cross legged, her wrists tightly bound within her lap, dreamy blue eyes fixated upon him concernedly.

"Why hello Harry." She said congenially.

Just thinking sent a sharp throb through his skull, and he quickly discovered his arms to be bound behind his back.

With a frustrated thump he hit his hands against the floor, a stabbing pain ripping his fist.

He did not need Luna's proclamation to know that a shard of glass now stuck from his hand. The warmth welling from it, trickling down his fingertips, was enough to inform him.

A single crimson drop fell free, it's sound reverberating through his hollow chest.

Drip.

The suffocating weight of despair struck him hard, paralyzing him.

Drip.

Ron was gone.

Drip.

Ginny's unwilling hands had done the unthinkable.

Drip.

Death Eaters were in Hogsmeade.

Drip.

A strangled sob shattered the silence.

Drip.

His fists snapped shut, tugging at the bindings. His eyes, blurred with rage, searched the ruined pub, taking it in with cold calculation.

Drip.

The floor now resembled a greenhouse, a shattered plant holder had sent soil strewn across it.

Drip.

Butter beer and other concoctions pooled together in frothy puddles, broken chairs and overturned tables creating hazardous paths.

Drip.

Broken glass glittered in the afternoon sunlight, casting surreal spectrums across the floor.

Drip.

He squeezed his fist, the blood flowing down, and began counting.

Drip.

In the spaces where neither glass nor soil lay, patrons did.

Drip.

Half a dozen, either unconscious or dead, lay upon the floor at scattered intervals.

Drip.

The rest, the conscious, had been bound and lined up against the walls.

Drip.

"Stupid crying Mudblood!"

Hermione...

She lay collapsed against the far wall, her arms bound like his own.

Drip.

Before her towered a ranting figure clad in black, and clenched within the cruel confines of the Death Eater's fist trailed long locks of bushy hair.

A large bruise ran the length of her tear stained cheek.

"I should have finished the job when I had the chance you filth." Scowled the Death Eater, throwing back his hood.

His breath caught in his throat.

Dolohov.

The image of Hermione's limp form in the Department of Mysteries flashed through his mind. She had nearly died at Dolohov's hands...

"What do you think here Ludovic? Should I finish her off?" The Death Eater called out, kneeling in front of her. "Or what about you Mudblood? Care to join your worthless red-headed friend over there?" Dolohov chided, poking her like a slug with the end of his wand.

Hermione's sparkling eyes met Dolohov's unflinchingly, her lips curling back to spit in his face.

He recoiled, a look of the purest revulsion over-sweeping his wasted features. "Oh you filthy..." He muttered, frantically wiping his face in the folds of his cloak.

"Hey Antonin!" An overly cheery voice called out, stopping Dolohov's hand mid-strike. "Since were only supposed to watch the kiddies until He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named gets back, what do you think of..."

Dolohov whorled on the cloaked figure, who had just emerged from behind the bar, waving a salvaged firewhiskey bottle.

"Ludovic he is our Lord and shall be addressed as such!" Dolohov roared dangerously. "One more slip and I'll make sure the Mudblood lover isn't the only corpse in here!"

Ludovic appeared unconcerned, and began filling two whiskey glasses. "Antonin what you need is a good, stiff drink."

Dolohov scowled, quickly aiming a powerful kick to Hermione's midsection. The crack of her ribs echoed between the pub's walls, as did Harry and Neville's cries of protest.

"Now Antonin was that really necessary?" Ludovic asked nervously.

Dolohov turned, his wand raised threateningly. "One. More. Word. Ludovic. Just. One."

Ludovic raised his hands in a conciliatory manner, knocking his hood from his face in the process.

"Now Dolohov she's just a girl. All I was saying is tha..." But the rest of his words were lost upon Harry, for beneath the vise of the dark hood was the boyish face of Ludo Bagman.

Kenneth Bothan's head shot up, while Tonks ran forward, wrapping a protective arm around Emily. The fallen umbrella lay forgotten, spinning in concentric circles upon the pebbled ground, a toy of the billowing wind.

"Kenneth we should leave!" She cried, hoisting Emily into her arms.

Her barely concealed urgency rang true within the President's ears, for he was already sprinting back to where they stood.

He was a man who understood the world's dangers.

Emily squirmed, her auburn head following her father's progress towards them. "Daddy, your knees are all muddy." She scolded seriously.

Kenneth smiled grimly, his jaw set. "I can take her."

Tonks nodded, relinquishing the girl to withdraw her wand. The ever-increasing chill was closing in. It wouldn't be long...

"What's going on?" Kenneth asked urgently.

"No time to explain." She responded, taking off down the path. She could hear Kenneth's heavy footfalls behind her, splashing in the muddied water.

They rounded the bend in the pathway, the heavy grove of trees falling away to reveal the dismal lot. The car, their escape, was in sight, yet heavy despair drenched her soul.

Nymphadora's feet slid in the gravelly mud, and she came to a halt, throwing out an arm out to stop what was left of the Bothan family.

It was right then that little Emily Bothan began to whimper.

Kenneth's dark eyes quickly blinked away water. "Tonks what's thi..."

"Daddy we need to run. Please daddy run." Emily was pleading hysterically, her face buried into Kenneth's shoulder.

Staring ahead at the looming figures, Tonks could only shake her head.

"I don't think we have time to run."

"YOU!"

Ludo Bagman's bluish eyes turned on him, a pleased smile replacing his previously perplexed one. "Ah... Harry boy. I was wondering when you'd come around."

Dolohov scoffed. "Precious Potter indeed. Tell me Potter, how was your wittle nappy?"

"So tell me Harry," Ludo interjected, seeming determined to steer the conversation his way. "How have things been?"

"Yes wittle Potter. How have things been without that mangy old dog of yours?"

"Antonin..." Ludo sounded distinctly uncomfortable.

In the distant background he could hear Neville's choked stuttering.

"H-how have they been?" Harry repeated, dumbfounded. How have they been?

"Not too good Mr. Bagman." Luna's misty voice drifted out, answering for him as he gaped like a fish. "Harry's been having a rough year, as you can see."

A pitiless snort came from Dolhoh's direction.

"He lost his godfather, and with people such as yourself switching sides and betraying him, I trust you can see why." Luna continued casually.

Bagman was suddenly refilling his drink.

"After all, Harry doesn't want anyone else to die, and when people he trusts start killing people..."

Bagman's glass stopped halfway to his lips, eyes widening defensively. It was a moment before his composure returned.

"Now I've never actually killed anyone per say Miss..."

"Lovegood." She supplied.

"Lovegood." He continued. "It's just that..."

A strange calm had overtaken him, the slight shaking of his own hands lost upon him. "It's just that your content with allowing others to do it for you." He said disdainfully. "Your content with being a coward, with siding with what is easy rather than what is right."

Bagman eyed him apprehensively, swallowing hard. "Now Harry, you know how the Ministry is." He began imploringly. "They never support anyone but themselves..."

"At least they don't kill anyone!" Harry bellowed, arms shaking with suppressed fury.

"But Harry j-just think about this for a s-second. He-Who-Must-Not...I mean my Lord..." He quickly corrected himself, spying the malevolent look of Dolohov. "He just desires the Ministry's downfall. So long as people stay out of his way no one will get hurt. Now I ask you Harry, my boy, is that really so bad?"

"Replacing one dictatorship with another. Sounds logical to me." He retorted sarcastically.

Besides him Luna nodded approval, her fingers drumming against her bindings to some unrecognizable tune.

"When you disappeared my grams was worried about you! Y-you...Your..." Across the room Neville Longbottom's voice rang out, surprising everyone.

Harry caught a glimpse of Neville's uncharacteristically contorted face.

It was frightening.

"You're no better than Bellatrix you slime!"

The poignant accusation hung thickly in the air, no one speaking. Bagman had become very interested in his drink, shifting uncomfortably under the angry eyes of all save for Dolohov.

For someone to turn their backs, on even the Ministry, in favor of Voldemort...

It was unforgivable.

Drip.

He had nearly forgotten how his own hands bled, the light headed feeling out of place for the situation. Fortunately the free flow of crimson life was slowing, his coagulation factors finally kicking in.

Harry shook his head, ignoring the slight spin of the world. "You were acquitted once Bagman." He hissed, eyes scanning the room for a way out. "So tell me, were you a spineless coward back then too, or just stupid?"

Bagman cringed. "Harry I was never a Death Eater!"

"But you are now." His voice quivered. "So tell me, why'd you do it?"

Dolohov's smug expression betrayed even his interest in the answer, and Harry was not about to let the Death Eaters distraction go to waste.

Keep them talking...Keep them distracted...

His hands began roaming across the floor behind him, feeling for another sharp sliver of glass.

"Well you know Harry, goblins, they're nasty business." Ludo said, fidgeting. "You know how they are if they're after ya and..."

Harry did his best to glare, feigning interest as Ludo's brow creased curiously.

"Come to think of it you probably don't Harry. But it's not fun business, goblin debt collectors that is. And since the Ministry wasn't about to increase my salary these boys said they'd be glad to help me out of my jam..."

"That you got yourself into!" Neville shouted furiously from across the room.

Bagman eyed Neville warily. "I can see where you'd think that but..."

"BUT WHAT?" Neville roared.

Luna inconspicuously sent a broken bottle piece sliding his way, his fingers coiling around it like a snitch.

"But these Death Eaters, they're not so bad."

Harry very nearly dropped the shard, his eyes bulging out.

"Not so bad?" He repeated gruffly.

Bagman nodded vigorously. "No! Not at all Harry! In fact their rather..."

"Tell that..." He hissed lowly. "To my mum and dad. Tell that to Sirius. Tell that to Ron!"

An odd expression crossed Bagman's face. "Now Harry really..."

Harry's lips parted, accusation dripping as thick as the blood from his coiled fists, only the sound never came.

The soft sound, and flicker of movement upon the floor, drew the breath straight from his lips.

"Kaylens..." He breathed softly. He had nearly forgotten...

"Ah another one to join the fray?" Dolohov called cheerfully, sauntering over to where she lay, partially concealed by an overturned table.

The Death Eater reached her, roughly dragging her squirming form up.

"Can't leave you free to roam around now can we?" He hissed, drawing unnaturally close to her.

Harry's stomach lurched wretchedly as Dolohov's lips grazed her blood stained cheek.

"After all, fiery tempers like you..."

"Get. Your Hands. Off. Her." Harry spat dangerously, drawing Dolohov's attention to him. Anything to get him away from her... She looked ready to collapse...

The Death Eater regarded him coldly. "Or you'll do what exactly?"

"You don't want to know." He hissed lowly, ceasing the sawing movement upon his bindings. He couldn't afford to let Dolohov see...

"Oh but I do!" He said menacingly, a cruel smile lighting his dead eyes. "I'd very much like to know what Precious Potter thinks he could do to me."

His eyes narrowed, a cruel smile of his own crossing his features.

"I could show you why Voldemort is so afraid of me." He whispered threateningly.

The cords winding around Kaylens' wrists snapped tight, Dolohov's tense grip betraying his agitation.

Harry went on, the room swaying unnaturally as he spoke with malicious measure. "Or you could do yourself a favor Dolohov, and leave. Leave before you make me really angry."

Dolohov shifted uncomfortably, mirroring Bagman's movements. He took the opportunity to slowly slice at his bindings yet again.

The glass, slick with his own blood, nearly fell from his grip. Thankfully the error was lost upon the Death Eater, for Dolohov had chosen that moment to turn Kaylens around, hissing something into her tangled tresses furiously.

His wrist rung with the pain, brought about by another slip of the glass, as Kaylens body was tossed besides him.

His sawing movements halted, his eyes drawn to where she lay, panting faintly besides him.

"There... " Dolohov sneered. "Enjoy your mudblood friends Precious Potter. Once our Lord gets here we'll see how brave you really are."

He swallowed hard, watching Kaylens' eyes flicker open. He wanted to say something, anything...

He had failed her...

Hermione's soul wrenching tones brought a grimace of fear to both their features.

"Brave?" Hermione's weak voice chided from where she sat, propped against the wall. "You ask him about bravery? He's sixteen, not even a fully qualified wizard, yet you fear him so much as to disarm him and bind him."

She spat all of this into Dolohov's approaching face, just before his hand reared back, slapping her roughly to the floor.

She let out not a cry, peering upwards through her narrowed, swelling eyes, just in time to see a dark boot rearing back.

"Hey Dolohov!"

Dolohov's foot froze mid-kick, hate-filled eyes flying towards Neville's pudgy face.

"You don't want to do that."

Dolohov's thick eyebrows disappeared beneath his mangy hair. "You presume to order me around boy?"

Neville shrugged casually. "You can contaminate yourself if you want." He sounded uncharacteristically Slytherin. "I didn't realize dirty blood suited a Death Eater."

Dolohov laughed roughly, buying Harry more time.

Neville you're a saint...

A bead of salty sweat broke free from his forehead, rolling into his mouth. Setting his jaw he worked, the glass shard digging into his thick bindings.

Snap.

The shard slid so low, so fast, he nearly cut too deep, the breath of pain catching fast in his throat.

The bindings were looser.

Twisting his hands testingly, he found with the first fiber's severing had come a greater range of movement.

Eyes locked onto Dolohov's fist, slamming into Neville's jaw, he twisted his wrists, ignoring the burning sensation of dried wounds ripping open. Warm, thick life blood welled from these spots, his scabbed over fingers feeling in his cloak...

They had taken his wand, but Rosmereta's... The waitress'...

Polished mahogany brushed beneath his rough skin, Kaylens' luminous eyes meeting his own, comprehension shining within their fiery depths...

He could reach the sequestered wands.

He was armed.

"Pumpkin...Honey mummy needs you to do mummy a favor. Can you do that honey?"

She whimpered, her face buried in her father's rain soaked suit. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't. The cold feeling was there. She could hear her mum, she wanted to see her, to hug her, but she was too scared to look away from the safety of her father's arms.

"Do you miss your mummy little girl? Would you like to see her?"

Emily squeezed her eyes harder, willing the voice away. "It's not mummy..." She whispered. "I can't see mummy..."

Ah, ah, ah, ah... Little darling your mummy is busy now. Can't you see that?"

She shook her head frantically, squeezing her dad's neck. "No... No..."

"Open your eyes you little bitch!"

The cruel lady's dark eyes danced in her mind. She didn't want to see the lady again. She didn't want to.

"Daddy..." She whimpered frightfully.

"No not daddy. Mummy! You wanted to see her little brat, so here, LOOK!"

Daddy would open his eyes... He would. He wasn't afraid of anything. Maybe if she opened her eyes the lady would go away again.

Emily swallowed, counting hard to ten.

"Please mum..."

Emily's watery eyes opened, a dark suit coat staring back.

Mummy needed up. She needed air. The mean man was there again, shoving her face into the puddle. Her mummy didn't like water.

Emily cried out, screeching, shaking her head back and forth, throwing the images away. She wanted them to go. Her damp, rain-soaked braids flung into her father's face as she shook, but she did not notice.

"Kenneth take Emily and go."

"Tonks what's..."

"You can't see them Kenneth, but they're there."

"No..." Her own whimpers rang in her ears, her icy hands shaking her mum. Why wasn't mummy waking? She had to... "No..."

"Tonksie!" Had she shouted? Could the nice lady hear her?

"Kenneth get to the car. Drive away."

"Tonks I can't leave..."

"I'll be fine. Just go. NOW!"

Emily's reeling world reeled more, for her father had taken off at fast sprint, splashing water over her legs.

In the dim background, somewhere beyond her mother's screams, she could hear the nice lady shouting something.

Her world dimmed away as a silvery dog ran past.

Mummy always liked dogs...

Releasing the wand for what he promised would be only moments, he continued sawing at his bindings, slowly, rhythmically, trying to gain precious centimeters of mobility...

He was armed, and the realization had numbed him, his next move horribly elusive.

With the rhythmic sawing of the shard, his mind fell curiously blank for the first time in what felt millennia.

His gaze fell upon her as she moved, shoving herself up from where she lay on the floor, arms shaking fiercely, be it from shock or the pain he knew she daily bore, he did not know.

"Kaylens." He whispered softly, grasping for something, anything familiar in the horror that was his life.

She fell into place besides him, so close, her bloodied sleeve nearly brushing against his skin. She was blocking Dolohov's view of what he was doing, he knew it without even asking, for her eyes swept the room as those of the hunted would.

She was being as cautious as him, despite the slight sway to her stature.

Snap.

Another thread of the rope broke free, it's release masked by her sudden, purposeful coughing.

Her head fell forward, her coughs lingering long enough to seem genuine, and her golden, tangled locks came cascading down, falling over her eyes, veiling her expression from all but him. To his eyes

each shimmering strand, glinting in the dull afternoon glow, as well as her watery orbs, remained visible, as well as her bound wrists, white and torn from where she had frantically pulled, struggling for release in Dolohov's arms.

The bastard would never again lay a finger upon her.

He would never again lay a finger upon anyone.

Harry Potter had a few dark spells he was quite eager to try out.

Snap.

"How much longer do you think it'll be till he finishes questioning the village Antonin?"

Dolohov sneered. "Ludovic you are trying my patience as much as the half-blood and these..." The dark gaze of the man scanned the room, taking in the few conscious students and the two patrons bound and lined against the walls. "These spares."

"But what if the ministry..."

Dolohov kicked the floor, sending shattered glass skittering across Dean's fallen form. "We will be here and gone before those fools catch wind of this. Besides, these things are delicate matters..."

Questioning? His ears listened, silently taking it all in. Besides him Kalliandra appeared to be doing the same, while Luna shifted the glass shards on the floor around with her feet.

Bagman seemed besides himself with questions. Harry mentally egged him on to be loose lipped.

"Perhaps we could stun them all and take them back ourselves?"

Dolohov scowled in his direction. "He will not be needing all of them. And you would do well to keep your mouth shut from now on or I will shut it for you."

The discussion ended.

It was then that he heard it.

"You..."

Only he had heard her whispered accusation, for it could be nothing else. The sheer revulsion in that one, whispered word left nothing to question.

Her eyes had moved from Dolohov, drifting into the background beyond, liquid fire boiling beyond their depths. Lifting his own he followed her gaze to where Ludo Bagman stood, pouring himself another fidgety drink.

He turned his confusion upon her, noticing her chest's rhythmic rising as her breaths came quicker, deeper, faster...

Golden eyes flickered shut, a pained expression falling across her.

"How sorry were you?" She breathed to herself, only barely, for the hatred saturating her soft tones was not lost upon him.

It was chilling.

His own boiling blood froze as he studied her, taking advantage of the lull in activities.

"Kaylens." He whispered, almost pleadingly.

Her hateful gaze burned right through him, straight to Bagman.

"Kaylens please..."

Her eyes fell shut, her fists opening and closing on thin air. "You're bleeding Potter, are you alright?" She whispered shakily.

Gently brushing his arm against her own, he waited for some sign that she was alright.

Minutes passed, before delicate eyelids flickered open, her eyes alight with an aberrant glow.

"Good." She murmured. "Because I can only give you a moment."

His mouth flapped wordlessly, shocked at the transformation before him.

Where his skin lightly touched her own, an unnatural tingling had begun.

The energy reverberating from him drew her nearer, an eternity passing before she was able to forcibly draw away.

His confusion radiated in startling quantities, but he would understand soon enough.

They would all understand...

She would not stray near him again, for her world was moving unnaturally slow, as if the events occurring around her were illusory, fleeting images from horrible dreams that would surely vanish with a waft of merciful consciousness.

Only no such merciful breeze came.

Her bound hands rose from her lap, tracing the tender line of her jaw, feeling her cooling skin. Somewhere, amidst the fighting, she had fallen, shoved away by Dean. The dried smear of blood along her cheek gave evidence to that.

She could feel the heat radiating from Dean's limp form.

He was alive...

Hermione...

The small girl's fingers had curled around fallen chunks of her bloodied, uprooted hair, as if the resolute Gryffindor had wanted something to hold onto, something solid and tangible to prove the afflictions had been real.

They had...

Her eyes fell willfully shut once more, immersing herself in the peaceful oblivion of darkness, where no demons save her own reigned.

The memories of a resurrected night, long due revenge, beckoned.

A limp hand lay splayed across the front corridor...Blood trickling onto the wooden porch boards...

"God forgive me..." She breathed, the palpable chill filling her lungs.

She had made her decision.

The chilling rain pelted down, something dark mixing with the muddy water licking at her nose...

The tingling began softly, like a light feather playing across her skin, traversing it's way upwards, inwards...

It was their blood swirling within the puddle...Sean's blank eyes staring back...

It was rolling in discrete waves, operating by it's own indiscernible rules, pulsating from the living, evaporating from the dead.

A boyish face appeared above her, sympathy in his oceanic eyes. "I'm awfully sorry about this kid..."

His voice had echoed through that night, and again this day.

He had stood idly by once, and was again.

She squeezed her eyes shut ever tighter, involuntarily shudders traveling through her, the heady pressure in the very air building, pulsating in uncontrolled waves outwards.

The world was taking on a hotter quality, every nerve burning with fiery intensity as she began reaching, feeling...

The acrid presence of Ludovic Bagman filled her, and she began drawing.

Her intent was to kill.

"Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, merely changed and transformed from one form to another."

First Law of Thermodynamics

Chapter 21 Amongst Us Part 1

It was as it was before, the feeling.

She did not fear, could not, for it was her very nature.

Her cells were multiplying with frightening measure. She could almost feel them, enticing her breath to come in sharp, pained gasps. The gentle tickling of prior, the feel of static lightly traversing across her skin, had been long since vanquished, replaced by fiery tendrils of unchecked energy weaving steadily through her, searing across her very skin like fiery, unkempt tendrils of hell.

The very atoms of her cells were moving in unnatural ways.

Pained eyes flickered open upon the world, reflecting the light as only she could see it. For the golden mist swirled throughout the room in thick, stifling electron clouds, sending fiery chills searing through the hollow shell of what she had once been.

The particles danced, shining from all that was alive, emitting softly from all that was dead, as energy must do. The human eye had always been blind to the subtler forms of it's majestic ballet, but it was a dance to which she was privy.

It was her curse.

She did not fear it, nor did she embrace it as she so ought. She simply breathed, allowing the palpable chill to fill her lungs, cooling her lips as it passed.

His presence filled her.

The hot particles upon the once barely discernable breeze vibrated, the golden mists forming tightly from her to him, flowing in a closed

circuit between them, her will unconsciously directing the charged particles to dance within the rhythm of her domain.

Fiery cold, soothing pain... Such were the sensations of electrocution, and all its conflicting ambiance.

An ambiance that beckoned, heeding her call as she pulled, drawing it from him, taking it upon herself without heed for consequence.

Besides her, drawing her concerted concentration from the impenetrable world of her mind, she noticed Potter stirring, taking advantage of the small distraction her spent energy afforded them.

Ludovic...

She could have chosen to attack the other Death Eater, but it had to be him.

Ludovic, as the other had called him, had stood idly by, watching them butcher her family with barely a grimace.

He had not lifted a finger.

"I'm awfully sorry about this kid..."

He would regret it. They all would. She would see to it.

But Ludovic first.

Potter's arms were moving now. She could feel it despite her closed eyes, as surely as she felt Ludovic's own sapping strength.

She pulled Ludovic's strength of life into herself, as she had done twice before, robbing him. The energy driving his heart pounded frantically, pulling from her, recoiling like a frightened child until she finally had him in her grasp.

Smothering that fire of resisting life for as long as she could, she silently cried in pain, feeling Ludovic do the same.

The soft sound of a body falling lifelessly upon the debris strewn floor met her even before the backlash did.

Everything that had occurred, had taken place within a poorly closed circuit. Now the white hot thread of energy, the one that had vibrated so thickly between them, finally snapped.

The electricity flew from his fallen form to her own kneeling one, leaving her no choice save to absorb it's sudden release with a twisted sense of satisfaction.

Her eyes flicked open as the force of it hit her, revealing sparkling, cloudy hues of golden light dancing around her, fading away as the shroud of unconsciousness fell ever closer.

Besides her Potter was moving... Standing... Shouting... All of this registered instinctively within, as she finally succumbed to the alluring darkness, beckoning with rest.

"Stick with the pack, go astray and we will kill you ourselves. Brethren or not."

The pack leader's words reverberated inside the wolf's pounding skull, distracting it from the pungent scents tempting it's olfactory senses, the townsmen's cruor teasing the pack, stimulating their bloodlust's desire.

Yet the pack controlled it, tramping as one across the periphery of what had once been the epitome of quaintness, before spreading out, fringing across the outskirts of the forest, taking cover in the forest's shadows. Here the pack would fight back the stragglers, catching any who sought to flee Hogsmeade before their task was complete.

The wolf pawed the ground with overt savagery, the animal's furor at being deprived it's quarry apparent to the elder accompanying it. A menacing growl calmed it, forcing the words of the pack into it's aching mind, for the tempting allure of the townsmen's blood, located

just within the walls of Hogsmeade, was causing the canine to lose itself.

It needed to feed.

The accompanied wolf, driven nearly mad with desire, sniffed deeply, huffing the coarse bristles of its snout away angrily. The hirsuteness of the beast's hide was coated in the fleshy cruor that had coursed freely from its torn pelt, the fresh tears of its transformation still apparent, for a werewolf was quick to transform, yet slow to heal.

Voldemort would fix that.

The knowledge drifted through the animalistic savagery plaguing the wolf's mind, forcing it to remember who it was, why it was here, what its job truly was beyond the desire brought about by the feigned hunt.

He was Remus Lupin, friend of those within the town's walls, the walls sheltering beneath the very tree boughs he and the other werewolves hid below.

He was there to discover Voldemort's intent, his plans, his faults.

The creature Riddle was intelligent in a way he could only dream of, for where generations of healers had failed in discerning the mechanisms of lycanthropy, Voldemort had succeeded, and harnessed its cruel power into something he could fully exploit.

When they had stood poised on the brink of Hogsmeade, seemingly ready to attack, he had been surprised. For their orders were not to kill, maim, or injure the town's inhabitants in any way. They were merely to form a guard around the town's circumference, ensuring that all wizarding occupants remained within its walls for a time.

And when that time was over, they were to be gone, fleeing into the forest where a portkey would await their return to the Parisian catacombs.

The reason for this peculiar Death Eater activity was unbeknownst to him. He could not fathom why.

But all his suppositions vanished as the scent of blood wafted upon a stale breeze.

His bloodlust was wholly returned, the teeth of the other creature of the night, the elder, digging into his pelt, the only thing preventing him from running into town to hunt his quarry.

The thick cloud was barely discernable, yet it pulsed around him, bearing down, stifling him as if an electric shock were coursing through him.

He felt numb, unable to move, let alone think, properly. His head spun in a not unfamiliar way, and despite this, Harry knew where he had felt the same sensation.

Grimmauld Place.

"I can only give you a moment"

It was her. She had whispered those words only seconds before. She had done it before, and she was doing it again, and though he did not know how, every fiber of him knew it to be true.

Kalliandra was doing this.

She could only give him a moment... A moment of distraction. A single chance to take them out.

He knew what he had to do.

The heady pressure increasing around him, over-powering any sure sense of equilibrium, he forced his arms to obey, grasping his wand in a barely concealed move as Dolohov's drugged eyes fixed upon Ludo Bagman's form, as the former Ministry Official disappeared behind the bar, clutching his chest.

Harry spared the man no pity, all his energy fixated on the soul task of catapulting to his feet, then twisting until the wand so precariously gripped within his bound hands was pointed towards the remaining Death Eater.

"Delirium Modente!" He gasped, his last shreds of energy spent as he set the curse free.

The dark curse.

A Death Eater deserved nothing less.

He never did see Dolohov's eyes as the last fledglings of sanity were stolen, but the curse left Dolohov's large frame withering upon the ground, hands clutching desperately, tearing thick, bloodied chunks of hair from his scalp.

The heady pressure lifted as suddenly as it had come, the cloudy form vanishing with a breath, and Harry fell to his knees, breathing deeply, watching in grim satisfaction as one by one, memory after memory, fled from Dolohov's twisted, scarred mind.

The Death Eater would be unable to recall even his own name once the curse had run its course.

Harry had finally learnt the joys of cruelty upon one's enemy.

It was several moments before he realized that while the others were stirring, Kaylens was not.

"Mr. President... Your wife and daughter are amongst the missing...

The car door slammed behind him, his daughter's small form curled up on the passenger side's floor, whimpering, begging for Mum...

Marie...

Fumbling for the key's with his frozen hands, his mind was assaulted. Every ungodly memory of the past weeks, of his life, slammed into his consciousness one, by one, by one.

Only the whimpering of his little girl kept him sane. He needed to stay strong for her.

The hospital doors slid open, the glass paneling revealing his haggard reflection. At the end of the guarded hall, lined with security, awaited the morgue.

Identification of the body was necessary.

"Tonksie...Tonksie...Daddy where's Tonksie!"

Emily's hysterical crying drew his eyes through the rain coated windshield to where Tonks stood, a look of pure consternation on her normally warm face. She darted, arm out, presumably clutching the wand he could not see.

What affected him, what jolted him, what sent his foot pressing upon the gas peddle, the wheels spinning, skidding in the watery gravel, was the sense of pure, unadulterated despair that overcame him as he watched her slip in the mud, falling...

She landed in the grass, her back to the Earth, arms stretched upwards in front of her soaked body, shaking so violently that he could see it through the rain's thick onslaught. It seemed as if she were supporting a burden of incredible weight, one that would bear down upon her if she faltered, one that would crush her and then come for them if she failed.

The mortician gestured to the nearest gurney, his heart lurching as he approached.

He already knew. He had seen their revival attempts at the home they had taken him to. He had seen the bluish tint to her once lively lips...

Yet having seen her... Knowing what was to come...

The tires spun in the gravel, screeching forward as he neared her. She had to get in. They were not leaving without her.

Without warning, without a single sign, the car lurched violently, halting as a resonating thud reverberated throughout the hood of the vehicle.

The thunderous sound startled him more than his daughter's cries, more than the sound of his cartilage breaking as his nose collided with the steering wheel, for a large dent had formed in the hood, the glass of the windshield cracking, splintering out until a network of spider webs formed across it...

As the sterile sheet was pulled back, he knew none of it could prepare one for seeing the lifeless body of the love of their life for a second time.

The first time had nearly killed him...

A lock of her auburn hair fell loose, his hand smoothing it back...

Something invisible had collided with their car...

The feel of blood trickling down his face, falling upon his white knuckled hands, which remained firmly clutched around the cold, black steering wheel, had drawn him back.

As did Tonks' weak cries from where she lay, scrambling in the mud like a terrified animal seeking escape.

"Emily stay here!" He commanded, tossing the door open, bracing himself for the rain and despair he somehow knew to be coming.

The pelting rain was the blessing, for it kept him conscious, revitalizing him with it's icy furor as the despair attempted to drown him. He staggered, reaching for her, for Tonks.

She was scrambling to her feet, slipping in the mud, crawling backwards towards him, fending he and Emily from whatever it was only she could see.

Her other arm was flailing, her whole face changing, moving in ways a face should not move...

He reached her, grasping her firmly to steady both he and her. "Kenneth..." She screamed angrily, choking on the thick downpour. "Kenneth get away..."

"Not without you!" He shouted into the wind, the rain slapping against him. His arms looped beneath her, hauling her with him, sliding her across the grass as her wand arm remained steadfastly out, preventing him from completely lifting her suddenly limp as a doll form.

Only her arms remained rigid, for she was refusing to move them, not even for an instant to stand...

Bent over her pulled her with him, scrambling backwards, finally falling onto the side of the car, its headlights blazing a brilliant path of light into the darkening, storm-shrouded day.

As he weakly tried to stand, yanking on the rear door of the vehicle, shoving Tonks' protesting form inside while she held her wand out, he finally saw it.

There, in the beam of light from the car's headlights...

A huge, looming shadow, flanked by many, many more, were surrounding them.

Yet the source of the shadows, he could not see.

The palpable chill in the air only grew until the frost upon the window's splintering turned to ice.

It was only then that it dawned upon him why Tonks would not lower her wand.

He froze.

Harry Potter, a true Gryffindor, completely, undeniably, froze. The shock of everything sinking in, preventing him from taking anything into account, save for what lay right before him.

"Kaylens..." He mouthed soundlessly, frightened by the pale pallor caressing her damp skin.

There were other patrons scattered, unconscious or worse across the pub, yet she was the closest.

Hastily he murmured the spell to loosen the remaining bindings, wiggling his blood encrusted hands until the ropes slid to the glass strewn floor. He dropped to his knees, reaching to brush her blood stained locks aside, when a shaken, yet commanding voice, halted him.

Kneeling besides her, Harry stared slack jawed as Ronald Weasley spoke, clambering to his feet, a dark bruise encircling the side of his face.

"Harry. Move. Away. From. That. Thing." He repeated, a threatening air creeping into the barely uttered command. "Move away, before it wakes."

Harry blinked stupidly, not fully processing Ron's words. All he knew was that Ron was not dead. Ginny's curse had not worked. And now a pair of icy blue eyes were fixated upon Kaylens as if she were Voldemort himself.

Fortunately for Harry, Luna was not nearly as thrown by Ron's sudden return to the realm of the living.

"Why hello Ronald. I was wondering when you'd stop pretending."

Ron's eyes flickered to Luna's for the briefest of seconds, before his wand shot out, fixated upon his quarry.

"So how long have you been awake Ronald?" She continued airily, rising to her feet in one fluid motion. Her bound hands began fiddling with her soil strewn hair, brushing it back curiously, as if it were a mere pest to be dealt with.

Ron's bruised face contorted into a scowl at this. "Long enough." He responded warily.

Luna was moving to where Ron still stood, staring at Kaylens as if she were Lucifer incarnate. "Well Ronald, would you mind undoing these for me?" She articulated, extending her wrists to him expectantly. "Harry's the only other one with a wand and he seems a bit preoccupied."

Ron's gaze never left his target, his wand flicking to Luna's outstretched arms without a glance, sending her tight ropes coiling free.

Luna smiled happily, flexing her wrists testingly at eye level, as Ron took a step forward.

"I'll ask you one more time Harry." He muttered menacingly. "Get. Away. From. The. Grim."

Harry's confusion regarding Ron's sudden appearance was routed by the serious expression across the redhead's freckled face. At a loss for explanations, he turned back to the girl before him, laying his hand upon her brow, feeling her cool skin beneath his own as Ron's poisonous stare burrowed into him.

"Harry she's a Grim. A Living Grim. Get the hell away from..."

He scarcely heard Ron's baritones, for a gentle tingling was radiating onto him, running across his open palm where his skin fell onto her own, as if small bits of static electricity were passing between them.

His fingers trailed down her face, a soft moan escaping her lips, drawing her shallow breaths into stark contrastation with his own.

Forgetting Ron's words, his eye's drifted from her to where Dean lay, sprawled beneath an overturned table that Luna was up-righting. "We need to get help..." Along the walls the scant others present were watching with bated breaths. "We need to get out of here before..."

"First you need to get away from the Grim Harry!" Ron nearly bellowed, wand arm shaking violently. "You might not know what she is, but you saw what she did!"

Hermione let out a muffled protest, and Ron's eyes flickered for a moment to where she sat, propped up, wide-eyed and staring.

It was the chance Harry needed. He did not know what had happened to Ron, but certainly his friend meant Kaylens harm. He was deluded. Grim's were omens of death. A living, breathing, sentient being could not be one.

He quickly placed himself between them, his own blood stained wand out, directly in Ron's furious face.

"Ron look, we don't have time for this. There are other Death Eaters in town and we don't have time..."

"We can't leave that thing lying around." Ron challenged, raising his own wand until it was eye level, directed at his scar. "I wouldn't have believed it myself had I not seen it. But leave a Living Grim lying around and it will kill you later."

"Ron stop it!" Hermione shouted, slightly hysterical as Luna knelt, freeing her and Neville's bindings.

Behind him another unhappy murmur rose from Kaylens unconscious form.

Luna now hovered over a quietly muttering Dolohov, sending thick ropes coiling around his arms and legs. And as Harry watched her,

he noticed one of the non-student patrons inching away from where they stood, her frightened face fixated on Kaylens as well.

His eyes narrowed. "Would someone kindly tell me what's going on here?"

"But she can't be... He thinks she a Reach but she can't be..." Hermione stated weakly, her small form barely supported by Neville.

Harry's eyes did not leave Ron's for a second. "A Reach? And to me that means..."

"An energy shifter." Neville supplied. "That... That t-thing that just happened..." The Gryffindor attempted to wave, nearly dropping Hermione in the process. "That thing with the air... It was e-energy... They can draw on it when they need to..."

"When the need to kill people." Ron finished angrily. "I'd bet my broom Bagman is dead, Harry. That thing..." He indicated, gesturing violently with his wand. "Did it!"

"And she also quite possibly saved our lives." Neville sighed frustratedly. "She gave Harry the distraction he needed to take Dolohov out."

"She could have killed us all Neville!" Ron shouted, mercifully unheard upon the street as Luna's silencing charms were cast upon the windows and doors.

"But, she, didn't!" Neville shot back, setting Hermione down in one of the few chairs that had escaped unscathed.

Ron's resolve only grew. "Harry, she's not human." He declared. "She's not even a witch! All she is, is an energy draining leech that would kill her own mother if she had the chance! That's why they call them Living Grims! Whoever comes in contact with one dies! Meeting one is like seeing your own..."

"Death?" Harry supplied angrily, finally losing it. His head hurt. Ron being alive, Kaylens whatever it was they thought she was... It was

simply too much to process. "Ron if she had wanted to kill us, don't you think she already would have?"

Ron's expression faltered, long enough for Harry to know that the truth of his words had sunk in.

"But she can't be a Reach..." Hermione was continuing on, sounding pained at the lack of certainty. "Remember History of Magic, the unusual species unit? You know with Veelas and Vampires? Things like that? We covered Reaches, and a Reach can't do Magic! They simply can't... And I've seen her do magic in class..."

Ron snorted, a smug expression crossing his face. "A pre-magicked wand. Don't you see? We've never seen her do anything beyond basic, first year spells now have we?"

Harry's mind churned, searching for something to refute the statement, but when it came down to it, he had only seen her levitate Professor Gai and stun someone...

In Dumbledore's office she hadn't even reached for her wand... She hadn't even tried to defend herself...

My God...

"Look..." He said shakily. "Just don't touch her. Leave her be, at least until we figure a way out of this mess."

Ron's hardened expression did not soften, but his wand arm fell "Fine. But remember who's idea this was Harry. Grim's are supposed to be killed on sight. So you can deal with the Ministry. Not. Me."

Killed on sight...

A sickening feeling rose within his chest at the words. They couldn't... The Ministry wouldn't...

Yet looking at Ron's expressionless face, he knew it to be true. Mr. Weasley worked at the Ministry. Ron had grown up in the wizarding

world. Ron knew all of it's prejudices, even agreed with some. Hell, Ron had been afraid of Lupin upon first finding out hadn't he?

"A Grim... A Living Grim... Amongst Us... Amongst us again..."

The whimpering of the woman, who was still attempting to slide away, reached his ears.

The sound of her frightened ramblings made him realize just what he was dealing with.

Kaylens had killed someone... His eyes flew to where Bagman had fallen, only to watch Ron traverse his way there, as if in slow motion, bending down, taking a pulse...

Ron's hate filled gaze, directed at the girl on the floor, was all the confirmation he needed.

Bagman was dead.

My God she really did...

He swallowed the cold truth, turning to look upon her.

Golden eyes were staring back, a frightened expression across her pale, tear stained face.

The car door slammed behind him, the rain having left the leather interior drenched with pooling rain droplets, and as his foot met the gas, he marveled at how the barely conscious Auror still held her wand high, aimed out the window, quietly muttering about a man named Lupie.

"Daddy... Dada..."

Something was boiling within him, something worse than fear as he shifted into reverse, slamming on the gas so hard the subsequent tire squeal left Emily screeching.

Tonks was leaning between the front seats, aiming her wand through the ever widening crack in the windshield, screaming as he stabbed violently at the defroster.

Somehow, amidst it all, his brain was still working logically.

Hydroplaning on the slick soil the car spun. Cranking the wheel into the turn the spin slowed until it was under his control, and they were on the road, driving, sobbing, shaking.

He wasn't sure when he finally lost consciousness. He was only sure that they were far beyond the cemetery where his young wife lay.

"Kaylens..." He whispered disbelievingly. Never before had he seen even a trace of such blatant emotion upon her normally complacent features.

Seeing Kaylens torn expression he rounded on Ron.

"You were going to kill her?" He shouted furiously, putting the pieces together. The way Ron had pulled his wand on her, the uncharacteristic, hardened expression...

He stepped backwards, shielding Kaylens with his entire body. "Is that what you planned?" He hissed, voice quivering dangerously. "It's not enough that the ministry indoctrinates their petty prejudices against everything and everyone through that ridiculous Daily Prophet and it's ridiculous laws, but you were stupid enough to actually consider listening to them weren't you!"

The red head's expression faltered, and it didn't take long to see why, for Ron's eyes had fallen on the now conscious Kaylens, a look of mingled fright and disgust upon him.

Harry was furious for reasons he could not begin to understand. "What's the matter Ron?" He shot out. "You had no problem talking

when you were proclaiming her inhuman a few seconds ago, yet now can't answer a simple question. Why is that?"

Ron let out a stutter.

"Sorry, couldn't quite catch that Ron." He nearly growled, glancing to the floor where Kaylens sat, her frightened expression giving way to one of sheer astonishment as their eyes locked.

"It's okay..." He mouthed, incapable of articulating anything else. All he knew was that if she was what they claimed her to be, then it wasn't her fault. She surely had not asked for it, just like he had not asked to have a death sentence hanging over his own head.

Suddenly every hostile action, every cruel word that had passed between them made perfect sense.

The whispered conversation in the bookshop, her anger at having been overheard, her familiarity with Remus, a werewolf, another hated species with laws ruling their kinds lives...

His anger at Ron's actions boiled over.

He leveled his wand once again. "Answer the question Ron."

Ron's eyes, glued to the floor, refused to look up. "I...I hadn't thought that far ahead..."

"Doesn't look like you were thinking at all actually."

"Harry you don't understand what those things are capa..."

"Ronald stop it!"

All eyes darted to the small brunette in the chair.

"Tell me you weren't even considering that." Hermione clipped. "I thought you were too smart to go by what the Ministry says! It's just another petty law..."

"It's not petty Mione! It's for our protectio..."

"Protection from what?" Hermione queried. "Anyone with a wand is dangerous, just because she's different doesn't mean she should be singled out Rona..."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Hermione! She killed Bagman! Did she show any mercy then? Did she?"

Hermione shook her head sadly. "He was a Death Eater. Do you really think he would have shown any to us?"

The red head scoffed. "This is Bagman were talking about..."

"He wouldn't have."

The verbal diatribe between the two teenagers ceased at Kaylens' scarcely uttered words, and as Harry turned he was surprised to find her standing besides him, watery eyes fixated on Ron.

"Ludovic Bagman was his name yes?" It was more of a statement than a question, and he let it remain in the air as he quickly unbound her arms for her.

"Thanks." She breathed, rubbing her arms where the skin had torn, flecks of dark cruor flaking off, floating to the debris strewn floor.

"How could you know that, murderer?" Ron snapped, though for once he scarcely acknowledged it. His consciousness was focused upon her reaction, upon the slight shaking beginning in her left arm, the stiffening of her neck, the balling of her fists...

Her eyes flickered closed, yet not quick enough for him to miss the deep pain residing within them.

"Because Ludovic did not show any mercy to my family." She responded softly, hauntingly. "That is all you need to know."

Ron was babbling about something. He caught the phrase, 'Bagman wasn't a killer,' but suddenly that all seemed so unimportant. For

Hermione had asked what spell had actually hit Ron, and he was suddenly wondering that as well.

"Ron this isn't you!" Hermione quelled. "What has gotten into..."

Suddenly Ron's behavior clicked into place as well, and he turned around, scanning the room furiously, taking in each of the unknown patron's faces.

Hermione was right, this wasn't Ron. He may be brash, often speaking without thinking, but Ron was not violent.

Not only were there Death Eaters to deal with on the outside, he realized, ones they would have to deal with eventually, but they now had to deal with internal enemies.

Ones skilled in the Imperious curse...

His eyes landed upon the whimpering woman nearest the door, an unnaturally concerted expression upon her face.

Remorse... Guilt... Satisfaction...

The lifeless sight before her, the one she had so ruthlessly denied the right to live, ought to instill something within her.

Yet it did not.

Weasley's scathing diatribe, intermingling with her own cruelly uttered truths, resonated within the confines of her mind. Her eyelids finally flickered shut, seeking momentary respite as the pungent scent of scorching lumber rose from the dark recesses of her memory, encircling tightly around her.

She had killed, yet it did not feel as it ought. Nothing could have prepared her for the cold feeling of emptiness rotting away inside.

She felt empty inside, nearly undone, and perhaps this man lying lifelessly before her, evidencing her executed revenge, would be

enough to shove her over the last crevice into the unreachable claws of cruelty.

For the life of her she could not summon one iota of remorse, for he had stood by during the slaughter, having the power to stop it, yet failing to act.

He was as guilty as those who had committed the crimes themselves.

Yes... She judged him.

The merciful, loving human she had once been was gone. It had been fading since the day the first monster had strode into her home, extinguishing the wicks of life burning upon her brother and grandmother's candles.

It had finally died the night she learnt the truth, for the tragedy in her young life had not been enough. The sick gods governing existence had not yet had their fill of her pain, her grief...

The scent of thick ash once again filled her nostrils, the painful realization that it was her own lifeblood pulling upon the ground, intermingling with her remaining brother's...

The pain her body now felt paled in comparison to the pain of what she had done. The lengths she had gone to survive that night...

The pain pouring unspoken from her lips was silenced as another voice rose up, saturated with the hate she felt burning within herself.

Potter...

"Let him go." He growled angrily. Though it was not his voice that drove her eyes to open, it was the tense feeling of his hand encircling her wrist, tugging her, forcing her to move until she was positioned directly behind him.

The muscles in his arm shook, vibrating with fiery intensity, rattling her own arm as well, yet her questioning gaze fell unnoticed, unseen upon the back of his dark head.

His attention was elsewhere, fixated upon a prematurely gray haired woman sitting nearest to the door.

It took her a moment to realize that the Weasel had already been stunned, and that his induced fury was on her behalf.

"Your idea... Clever really." Potter continued sardonically. "But I'd really love to know why you targeted her." The gesture of his head left no question that it was her to whom he was referring.

Confused she allowed herself to be led forward by Potter, closer to the irritated woman, whose eyes no longer quite met their own. "So..." He continued. "Is it because you're just another brain washed Ministry pawn, or does your leader closely resemble a snake?"

His voice was becoming rather snakelike himself... Or it could be her head, which was still reeling from her previous feat.

"Harry what..." Hermione sounded hesitant, and Kally's own eyes flicked over in time to see Hermione's dark ones flitting from one end of the room to the other, between the woman and Ron, then between Ron and a shattered plant holder.

Suddenly the brown haired girl, clutching her side, was staggering to the Weasel's, scattering broken bottles in her wake.

The woman watched her progress with a foul expression. "Whatever it is that you are insinuating boy, you should know that I am a Ministry official..."

Potter let out a barking laugh. "I'm supposed to be impressed by that aren't I?"

"Considering that you are committing a crime by keeping that thing alive..."

"The last time I checked the use of Unforgivables was a crime as well." He countered, slipping his fingers into her own reassuringly. "So why did you use it on a 16 year old Wizard?"

"And as Ministry official, Leanne, surely you know that the use of an Unforgivable on an Underaged Wizard merits a longer sentence in Azkaban." The other patron, looking to be in his mid-thirties chimed in, smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

Potter's acknowledged neither the new conversationist nor the Weasel's sudden ramblings as Hermione brought him back to consciousness.

"Why Amarante, what brings you to England? I thought your belligerent parents would have taught you well enough to stay away."

Amarante wagged his eyebrows in an oddly familiar way. "Well you know Très and I, never too far from trouble."

It suddenly dawned on her that Amarante was a spitting image of Professor Très.

"We should go." Luna called dreamily, her form barely visible from beneath the curtained windows she was peering out of.

"Why?" Potter voiced urgently. "Do you see someone coming?"

"No..." She called, emerging from beneath the drapery. "Just a feeling Harry. I think the Ira's are trying to tell me something..."

"Ira's?" Questioned Leanne incredulously. "You're all mad... I don't know what they teach you at that pathetic school of yours..."

"Hogwarts is not pathetic!" Snapped Neville, his own wand drawn and leveled at the disgusted looking woman.

"Neville's right. Hogwarts is really wonderful." Luna commented. "And Ira's are real." She added as an afterthought.

Amarante appeared greatly amused. "Ah, well at least the students are too put off by my brother's teaching methods are they Leanne."

Leanne scowled, but Amarante wasn't done.

"So let me guess Leanne. You're considering turning her..." He gestured towards where she stood in Potter's protective grip, "in to the Ministry, and were too much of a coward to confront her yourself, which is why you put the red headed, stuttering boy over there under the Imperious. Is that it?"

The woman was beginning to look like a cornered animal. "I have every right to do so! That thing is a monster..."

She internally cringed at the words she knew to be true.

"A monster that should be put down! And as for you!" She hollered, turning to Potter. "Consorting with such a thing! Why I never..."

"You ungrateful wench!" Interrupted Weasley. "They both helped save you're pathetic arse and all you can do is holler at them! How dare you!"

Amarante visibly yawned, and in a heartbeat his wand was out.

"Obliviate!"

The deafening roar of Potter, Luna, and Amarante all attempting to extinguish the woman's memory at once sent the wench's head snapping back into the wall, her eyes dazedly rolling around before unconsciousness took her.

"Well that solves that." Amarante muttered cheerfully, dusting his hands together. "The name's Amarante by the way. I was supposed to be visiting with my brother this weekend but well..." The man shrugged sheepishly, his ear length hair falling into his eyes. "Got knocked out by him instead. Ruddy Imperious wasn't something he could ever throw off very well unfortunately."

She hardly heard the rest of his words, for she had broken away from Potter's grip, dropping besides Dean's unconscious form.

No sooner had Kaylens released his hand than Amarante turned his wand on the remaining conscious patron. "Sorry dear but... Obliviate!"

Hermione's critical look as Amarante finished putting the patron to sleep was answered with an air of apology.

"Can't leave her free to turn the girl in either now can we?" He pointed out. "No offense but the British Ministry of Magic is a bit outdated in their laws and views. Australia has the decency to leave unusual species alone as long as they are not harming anyone."

Harry nodded his thanks gratefully. Enough had gone wrong today. They could not afford to leave any loose ends lying around.

"Is it unusual that no one here is dead?"

Luna's question was met by five bewildered gazes. Only then did Harry realize that she had not been merely milling around the entire time, but that she had been checking the other patrons to see if they were alright.

Her question did not seem to set well with him, nor Neville apparently.

"Isn't that a good thing?" He asked warily.

Luna's mouth opened, but Ron cut her off. "No Neville...It's not... Think about it, why would Death Eaters even bother attacking if it were not to kill? All of us are alive, and they aren't that incompetent. I thought for sure my number was up when that green curse hit me but it wasn't Avada Kedavra, I can tell you that much."

Hermione elicited an odd noise, but Ron went on. "And think about it. Why didn't they off Harry when they had the chance?" He glanced at him sheepishly. "Er...Sorry mate... But you know what I mean."

He nodded. "It's okay Ron."

Ron nodded, glancing at Kaylens now. "Sorry about earlier Kaylens. I may not like you but I would never..."

"I know." She replied without a glance. It was apparent that her concern was not for herself, but for Dean.

And the expression crossing her face as she peered closely at his ear was disconcerting...

"You're quite right young man." Amarante commented, yanking on his earlobes. "If I could venture a guess I would say that this whole..." He waved a hand around for emphasis. "Debate was merely a way to distract us from something far more sinister."

Far more sinister...

Harry did not like the sound of those words.

"Whatever their aim was I suggest we leave." Ron was pacing now. "But if Amarante is right then they won't exactly let us walk right out of here..."

Luna's gaze was drifting towards the rear exit. "Our best shot is the woods."

"The Forbidden Forest? Wonderful..." Remarked his red headed friend, looking thoroughly put out.

"No...She's right." Kaylens voice was oddly strained, her brow creased with concern as she continued examining Dean. "If I create a distraction one of us should be able to make it back to the school, Death Eaters or not."

Everyone, with the exception of Luna, looked at her oddly.

"What do you mean by distraction?" Neville asked warily.

"I mean I go out, drawing their attention away from those of you going into the woods." She huffed.

Hermione and Amarante were both shaking their heads.

"I can't condone allowing a teenager to put themselves in harms way." Amarante stated flatly, all trace of lightness gone from his voice.

"If they are not aiming to kill I'll be fine." Kaylens spat icily. "You were so sure of that a minute ago."

The older man's jaw dropped, leaving Harry with an uneasy feeling. "Kaylens I don't..."

She cut him off.

"Look! No one else may be hurt severely but Dean needs help." She said heatedly, gently fingering his ear. "His skull is fractured, and from the looks of it badly."

"How do you know that?" Ron challenged disbelievingly.

Her penetrating stare bored into him. "The human brain is encased in a protective fluid, and if it's fractured badly enough it can ooze out through the auditory cavities..."

"His ear..." Hermione supplied, responding to the confused looks upon his, Ron's, and Luna's faces.

Ron seemed to be having trouble accepting it. "And you're a healer since..."

Her shoulders visibly stiffened, a flash of anger passing within her eyes. "Since I've seen it before Weasley. Now do you want to argue or help your friend?"

The red head threw up his hands. "No need to get testy..."

Harry interrupted them before it could escalate farther. "We have to go. No more time for discussion."

Kaylens nodded, rising from Dean's side. "For once I actually agree with him."

Her voice was firm, steady, a steely glint in her eye as she tore her eyes away from her fallen friend. "He needs help and he needs help soon. We need to move."

"Someone is going to need to stay here." Neville pointed out. "Merlin knows what a Death Eater would do to an unconscious Muggle-born... Not to mention Madame Rosmereta and Lara."

"I'll stay." Came Hermione's voice, earning her a startled look from all parties. She shrugged sadly. "For once I'll admit that I can't do something. My ribs... I'm sure they're broken. There's no way I could outrun anyone right now."

Ron's face became drawn. "Fine. But you're right about one thing Mione. You're in no shape to fend for yourself at the moment. So someone else needs to stay behind."

Harry's eyes flew around the room, taking in the possible volunteers. There were the two patrons, Neville, Kaylens, Ron, and Luna.

"I'll stay." Neville volunteered. "I'm not in as good of shape as the rest of you. I'd have trouble outrunning them as well."

Ron's eyes narrowed onto him approvingly. "And that's something we intend to fix once this is over."

A sly smile crossed Neville's face. "The quicker you get out of here the sooner we can get started."

Ron nodded. "Alright. Hermione, you and Neville take Dean into the girl's restroom. Well prop the back door open so if anyone does come back they'll think we went out through the kitchens."

Harry eyed his friend carefully, admiring the idea. "And the rest of us will go out the men's restroom window. It leads right into the alleyway between here and Dervish and Bangs. Then Luna, Ron, and Kaylens can try to make it back to Hogwarts while Amarante covers me..."

She let out a protest, but a wave of his hand silenced her. "You're not going. End of discussion."

"I should create the distraction." Amarante countered.

"No." Harry replied, shaking his head decisively. "We need a distraction, and the bloody Boy-Who-Lived is going to give them one. I doubt the Death Eaters, orders to not kill or not, will be able to resist the chance to have a go at me. Besides, you're the more experienced wizard, so your aim is probably better than mine."

Amarante eyed him apprehensively, before a cheeky grin lit up his eyes. "Well alright then." He said, clapping him on the back. "Death Eater target practice. Looks like you're not going to have all the fun after all there Harry."

As Amarante went to help Luna with the bracing of Dean's neck, and the moving of his imp form, all the while whistling a Muggle show tune, Harry wondered who exactly he had just asked to cover for him.

Her skull ached.

The pinpoints of bright light speckling her vision needed to be sprayed away with a very large hose.

Preferably a power hose.

Groaning she attempted to dislodge herself from the crevice between the back and front seats that her bum had fallen into, the blinding pain in her shoulder letting her know that indeed, it had been dislocated.

Collapsing onto the almost slimy, rain soaked leather of the back seat she took stock of the situation, the tree branch jutting through the front windshield, ending where Emily's head should have rested, had she not been curled into a whimpering ball upon the floor mats.

Thank God Kenneth had forgotten about belting her in.

She had to get them out of there, and was now trying the handle, discovering the door to be wedged shut by another tree, for the car had veered off, bouncing from the ditch into the wooden area keeping pace with the road itself.

Her fingers found the automatic window key, pressing until she realized that it too, was nonfunctional.

She nearly swore, bracing against the opposite door and kicking out, feeling the resistance of the glass and the window curved out, buckling back in against her bruised feet. The grimace of pain was taking over her face, droplets of water from her mousy hair intermingling with her sweaty tear droplets as she continued her violent, desperate onslaught, watching the splintering spider web crawling across the glass...

Cringing she turned away, the splintering of the window giving way to hundreds of glittering shards flying amongst the sparkling lights already within her vision.

The oozing gash in her calf barely registered, distracted as Kenneth's cataleptic form slipped upon the slick wheel till the brunt of his weight bore down upon the horn, the blaring vibrations of it's constant, single noted beep shattering the afternoon silence that until then, had only been broken by the sound of the still groaning engine and the pounding rain.

Reaching over the seat she sent him slouching upon the door, the blood slicked horn falling silent as his weight fell away.

There was no need to allow the sound to attract any unwanted attention, for Dementors could move fast, though a car could move faster. But how long they had been out, how far Kenneth had driven before succumbing to the creature's effects, slumping over the wheel, and how long the creatures had had to make up the distance between...

She did not know the answer to any of these things, and could not afford the price of drawing them near if they had made it to their vicinity.

The President's nose was clearly broken, the cartilage sufficiently contorted to have allowed a free flow of blood from it upon the wheel. Now the clumping cruor could be seen, clustering upon his upper lip as if he had been eating a sadistic lollipop flavored for the vampiric sort.

She had to get them out of here, that much she owed him for saving her.

In the face of half a dozen Dementors Kenneth had managed to maintain his composure, not breaking down as she nearly had, and he had been without the benefit of a protective Patronus.

This Muggle was made of stronger stuff than the most battle hardened of wizards.

Contorting herself as best she could, she slithered out the window, clinging to the rain soaked roof for balance. Her sleeve snagged upon a glass shard embedded within the window frame, and her palm slid from the roof, barely catching against the thin tree trunk responsible for thwarting her previous efforts to open the door, and somehow this steadied her.

One arm dangling limply at her side she clambered to the ground in rain soaked clothing, her onyx boots matching the ever-increasing darkness of the sky.

Then her world lit up, a pair of headlights from the road turning to shine blindingly onto them.

Skidding up the muddy incline she began yelling for the device her Muggle father always carried around, a mobular something or other, but her hasty ascent halted abruptly, shock erupting through her entire being as the car door opened and slammed, a figure stepping into the headlight's beam.

Sirius Black was silhouetted within them.

"No one is truly evil. They simply see things from a different point of view."

A.K. Lovell

Chapter 22 Amongst Us Part 2

"In the long history of bad ideas, this one is the worst!" Weasley muttered, staring apprehensively down the alley, the threshold of the Forbidden Forest looming menacingly at him.

"Look on the bright side." Potter grunted, releasing his hold on the windowsill, dropping onto the dirt strewn ground. "If there are Death Eaters out there Aragog probably ate them first."

Weasley paled considerably, contrasting with the warm hues cast about the alley by the sun's dying light. The year was growing late, and the early hour of the setting sun would perhaps aid he and Luna on their task of remaining unseen in the forest's shadows.

Or at least Kalliandra hoped so.

Luna's striped orange and black socks appeared out the restroom window, and she dropped from the sill to the dusty ground, landing rather elegantly despite the large cloud of dust rising around her. Spying this the girl smiled, squatting down to spray a fine stream of water from the tip of her wand, right onto a sizeable dirt pile.

Her brow wrinkled curiously at this, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips as Luna plunged her hands into the murky concoction, stirring it around as if it were pudding.

"Hey gang, it's clear... The roof." Amarante hissed from his precarious position atop two trash cans. "Give me two minutes and then I'll be ready to cover you."

"Kaylens?" His calloused hand fell onto her arm, a determined expression on his face. "You're going with Luna and Ron."

The way he stated it left no room for question, but plenty for argument, her fiery eyes telling him pointedly that she was not about to acquiesce his request so easily.

"Please, no arguments." He added, as a gust of wind tunneling down the alley sent his unruly hair into his eyes. The way his nose wrinkled in annoyance as he shoved it away, disentangling it from his glasses, was almost laughable.

But there was nothing laughable about a perfectly healthy person wanting to risk their life when someone of no consequence was available.

Someone like her...

She sighed exhaustedly, her muscles filled with the dull ache of her earlier overextension. If only doing such things was less painful...

"At least tell me why you want to go alone." She whispered, so low that the Weasel would be unable to hear.

His humorless expression became further strained. "Because I'm a better piece of bait than anyone else here Kaylens, and I don't want anyone else getting hurt. Voldemort's quarrel is with me, not you."

He was wrong though, her incredulous expression heightening the effect of her softly hissed words. "His quarrel is with everyone, not just you. You're a naive fool to think otherwise."

He smiled strangely. "Trust me." He whispered, pulling on her arm until she was forced to step closer, his hardened face hovering above her own. "It is, and I don't expect you to understand it. Just accept it, and don't argue."

"Always speaking in riddles..." She murmured, a trace of sarcasm filtering through. "But there's one thing you haven't realized, but you have more to lose than I if they are aiming to kill."

A ghost of anxiety flickered within his eyes. "Why would you say that?"

"Because regardless of whatever quarrel you may have with him, unlike you, they've already taken everything from me." Her pained gaze fell to the ground, for she was loath to let him glimpse the cascade of emotions swirling dangerously close to the surface.

"There is nothing left for me to lose." She finished, feeling his fingers tensing upon her.

"You still have your life."

"No Potter..." She murmured sadly. "Not even that for much longer."

Reaching up she removed his hand, the veiled meaning of her words affecting him in a way she could not notice.

"Besides Potter." She added, forcing a smile. "I can't let you have all the fun now can I?"

Strained were the lines of his mouth.

"Plus..." She continued, spotting the increasing lines of his frown. "You shouldn't go alone. You can get all chauvinistic on me later, but right now I am coming with you."

A slight cough drew their attention to the Weasel's blatant annoyance. "Just let the dimwit do what she wants Harry. If she wants to get killed let her, but we need to go."

Her eyes narrowed onto the red head, but her short retort was cut off by Potter.

"I'm fighting a losing battle here aren't I?"

Her resolute expression remained her response to this statement.

"Then we stick together." He said seriously, drilling his gaze into her own as if it would help drill the information in a bit better.

He then turned to Weasley. "You and Luna stick together too."

"Aye, aye Captain." He grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Like I would want to walk around in the monster infested forest alone anywa..."

His voice fell dead, for Luna had just stood up, her face completely covered in mud. "Actually Ronald I can move faster by myself." She informed bluntly.

Upon seeing this Kally gave up on fighting back an amused smile.

Potter on the other hand was shaking his head, looking as displeased as Weasley. "No Luna, you could be seen and..."

"I've been invisible for over four years." Luna retorted without shame. "One more day isn't asking too much."

Oblivious to the despondent quality of her own words, Luna, the nonplused witch, resumed her attack on Weasley's face, insisting that blending in with the Woodsiemores would help him to evade Stubby Boardman and his band.

As Weasley twisted and turned, trying to evade her attempts, Amarante appeared overhead, dangling precariously over the roof's edge. Nodding his approval at Luna's methods, he threw Potter and her a glance. "Won you over did she? Well I'm ready to cover whenever you're both ready to go."

Disappearing over the edge with a grin far too wide for the situation, Luna managed to streak a smear of dark mud across the red head's vibrant hair. Weasley's frantic attempts to wipe it away only served to further embed it, lessening the tone of his hair.

"Leave it."

The Weasel shot her a look of pure malice.

"Red's the first color the human eye sees Weasley." She responded calmly, ignoring his scowl. "Not exactly a natural color for the forest either, so dulling it increases your chances of not being spotted."

Luna grinned widely, happy someone agreed, and stepped back to survey Weasley critically. Giving a sharp nod she pronounced him ready, flouncing away without another word.

"Ruddy nutters..." Weasley muttered, smearing his cheeks with his sleeve, stalking off down the alley.

"Hey Ron..."

Weasley halted, turning to glower at Potter as well.

"Red's not one of the colors Aragog can see." He said cheekily.

"Bugger off Harry."

Weasley's sharp clip hanging upon the air, the git set off towards the forest at a much slower, less jubilant pace than the one Luna had set.

Potter seemed to deflate, sighing defeatedly.

She would spare him her sympathies and thoughts on exactly how worthwhile the Weasel's opinions were worth, silently following him to where the alley opened up onto the main road, where they hovered awkwardly, eyeing each other nervously.

"Any marvelous plans for distracting them?" She intoned softly.

Eyes blinking like a newly awakened infant, he nodded.

"Shall I guess or did you plan on just being reckless?" Her slight smile softened the impact of her words, earning her a bemused head shake.

"If reckless is what you want..."

Without preamble Potter stepped out into the road, whistling loudly, like a tightly wound atom bomb about to go off.

Surely if she had a shred of intelligence she would stay put.

He had never had any intention of allowing her to accompany him, and now, as he stood in the middle of the road traveling through the heart of Hogsmeade, whistling and twirling his wand, he was pleasantly pleased to see her staying put.

Good.

The characteristic squeak of poorly oiled hinges echoed across the road, two cloaked men, hoods down, emerging from the Apothecary.

He smiled deviantly.

"Fancy seeing you here!" He called cheerfully. "I fancied a talk with that spineless snake of a master of yours. Any idea of where I can find him?"

Tick.

Colorful leaves flew by, swirling upon the breeze, dipping down to graze the dirt before the updraft reclaimed them, stealing them away.

Tock.

Quietly in the alley, Kaylens began cursing his name, an oddly amused grin creeping farther onto his face at her obvious indignation.

Tick.

Through the Apothecary storefront there was movement. The Death Eaters were clearly keeping everyone indoors, and he took note of this.

But why?

Tock.

The shrouded figures stared at him, and he stared back.

Only he was at least smiling.

"Amarante your aim better be damn good..." He mumbled in low undertones, eyes casting about for an escape route. He had been so preoccupied with getting rid of Kaylens, keeping everyone but himself safe, that he had forgotten that one key detail.

After all, there was no point in two idiots getting hurt, so his own, suddenly very moronic seeming self being blasted to bits would suit him just fine.

That was until Amarante took things into his own hands.

Behind the two villains erupted a fiery blaze, a single blinding flash rising out of the compost directly behind them, the detonation igniting the leaf strewn timber on the composts surface so that fiery tendrils flared inches from the Death Eater's billowing, windswept cloaks.

The distracted Death Eaters whorled, their attention caught by the sound of the blast, but not before the wind could fling the rising embers to a fresh source of cottony fuel. An inferno in it's infancy ignited upon the shroud of the devil's hem, the flames greedily devouring the woman's dark fabric quicker than human comprehension could process.

The woman's skin was already burning before the other had the sense to knock her to the ground, kicking loose dirt onto her to smother the ravenous flames, leaving him momentarily forgotten.

And he bolted.

Leaving behind the characteristic crackling of the kindling leaves, Harry sprinted, bolting for the shelter of the farthest alley, in the opposite direction from where Luna and Ron had gone.

The pursuit began, as one set of pounding footsteps hitting the cobblestone took chase behind him, a shout rising up followed by the red flash of the most common of stunning spells.

Amarante had been right, if the Death Eaters had been given orders to kill surely that jet of light would have stemmed from an uttered Unforgivable.

Two meters to go and another Death Eater emerged from the very alley he had been running for, blocking his path altogether, pinning him in between the two armed men right as the sun disappeared behind gray storm clouds.

Shadows fell across Hogsmeade's center road, another flash of bright red light brightening the scene as he stood helplessly between the two malefactors, wand raised in preparation to only be taken unconscious or dead.

The stunner hit the roof near the edge of the alley, sending pieces of thatch flying free while the metallic grate of the quaint shop's gutter filled the air, the long piece of aluminum breaking free to swing, flinging dirty, leaf strewn water upon all of them before it's pointy edge connected sickeningly with the newly emerged Death Eater.

The man was knocked powerfully to the ground, a large gash running the length of his back, and spells and curses suddenly being shot towards the alley Kaylens stood in.

Kaylens had sent the stunner, and yet another Death Eater was now pursuing her.

Stuttering in his step for only a moment he threw away the thought of going to her aid, for his own new friend had caught him around the throat, throwing him to the ground.

Before he even had a chance to defend himself another spell from Amarante hit the Death Eater hovering above him, sending the man flying to land next to the one the gutter had taken out. Scrambling Harry was on his feet again, reclaiming his wand to disappear into what he hoped to be a now unoccupied alley.

All the alleys of Hogsmeade were identical, the same brick or stone walls lining the sides of the buildings framing them, the same trash

bins and empty crates, the same litter strewn soil, and the same magical filth.

One could hide for hours within them, weaving in and out of where they jutted into the Forbidden forest, which the tiny village was nestled within, and this was exactly what he intended to do.

He intended to give a good chase, distracting at least a few Death Eaters from his two friends fleeing to the castle for help.

He had known he was fast upon a broom, but never before had he found himself in a sprint for his life. All he knew was that his recent growth spurt had lengthened his legs enough to keep a pace ahead of his pursuer, but his endurance...

He couldn't count on it outlasting what could be a highly trained Death Eater, let alone on being able to outrun and outmaneuver all of the flung curses.

Bolting straight down the alley, the curses meant for him reverberating off the crates, he reached it's end, rounding the corner, nearly losing his footing in the loose muck and grime as he flattened himself to the rear wall of what smelled distinctly like Madame Puddifoots.

Wand drawn he waited until the adrenaline fueled Death Eater rounded after him, only to meet the hard elbow to the face that Harry delivered. The yelling man's wand fell from his grip, and a quick stunner ended the man's conscious awareness of the acute pain.

Quickly he drug the body into the forest, depositing it behind a thick thorny brush, bound and silenced. Stunners were not meant to keep one knocked out indefinitely, so even if the man came to now any shouts for help would be unheard.

It was there, crouched behind the foliage, that he heard the approaching footfalls. Thanking Merlin that he had been concealed he attempted to get a glimpse, only catching sight of an indiscernible dark cloak.

A Death Eater...

Without a clear shot he patiently waited until they were close enough to spring his trap, and spring it he did.

Lunging out he grabbed the slightly smaller figure, spinning them around, his wand to their throat as they fell together against the rough brick wall of the building. "Not a sound." He hissed menacingly, mindful and unnerved by the person's lack of a struggle.

The deep golden tress flitting in the wind, dislodged from beneath her hood in the altercation, froze his lips mid-hex, as did the clearly recognizable, highly incensed huff of air.

"Damn't Potter..." She spat, somehow twisting around to face him despite the constant grip he held on her torso.

"Damn't me?" He hissed incredulously. "Damn yourself! I could have hexed you!"

"Yeah well if you hex me you'll have no one to bother once we get out of here." She snapped back, casting a surreptitious glance the way she had come. "I saw you get chased back here and managed to get across the road unseen I think..."

"You think? Bloody hell Kaylens just lead them right towards us!"

Her champagne colored eyes narrowed, golden flecks burning dangerously. "I believe getting their attention was the point, was it not?"

"I was wondering where your sarcasm went." He mumbled, the harsh thumping of his heart fueled by the realization that he had nearly used a dark curse on her.

"It came back the second you lied about doing this together Potter! You lied! And to think, I actually was starting to believe that you actually were sorry about earlier..."

"Right up until you introduced me to the finer points of Butterbeer..." He countered, his hands dropping to her waist, his head falling back against the bricks.

"Speaking of that take this." She hissed, shoving the broken off shard of a Butterbeer bottle into his hand. "I nicked it from the pub."

He frowned, looking at it's reflective surface. "Gee thanks. I'll just reflect the next curse sent my way with it."

"Funny, didn't seem that nonfunctional to the Death Eater I sliced."

His eyes widened. "You did what!"

"He caught my arm and was trying to hex me!" She snapped indignantly, their whispered conversation growing dangerously loud. "It's not like I killed him... Thought crossed my mind though..."

He stared for a second in shock at her words before finally managing to force his vocal cords to again, vibrate.

"Then I'm glad you had it." He muttered, slipping the glass shard into the pocket of his cloak. "Because if anyone is going to hex you it's going to be me, not some Death Eater with an attitude."

"Sod off."

"Gladly."

Yet neither moved, content to glare.

"And you didn't answer me about that stunt back there Potter." She whispered. "You just left me! I thought we were supposed to stick together!"

Frowning, her sudden reversion back to hostility made sense to him. "Ah... So that's why you're mad."

She merely scowled, fists visibly clenching, his own eyes unable to meet her own.

"Kaylens, I've already done enough to you. I couldn't justify leading you into harms way..." He replied morosely, a defeated sigh escaping his lips.

When his eyes finally rose to meet hers, he found them flickering uncertainly, her fists no longer clenched, but lightly relaxing where his hands held her steady.

"Look..." He whispered gently, all previous annoyance vanishing. "For the moment can we just call a truce? Stop the bickering for a bit?"

She tossed her head back, allowing her hood to fall free, releasing her mane of tangled locks that a slew of leaves had somehow wormed their way into.

"Okay." Her intonation tinged with apprehensive. "But if you ever pull a stunt like that again..."

A small smile tugged at the edges of his lips, his hand clamping over her mouth, effectively silencing her protestations. "It worked didn't it?"

"Hmph."

"And while we're on the subject of stunts..." He continued, eyes peering over her head, deep into the tangled coppices where the Death Eater's body lay. "Would you care to explain how you wound up in a Death Eater's cloak? You nearly had an Unforgiveable thrown at you."

Beneath his palm the feel of her laughter tickled his skin, the realization striking him perhaps harder than the mischievous glint in her eyes.

He had never before seen her look mischievous, but it suited her well, as did her light laughter.

"Please tell me there's not..." He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

"A stunned Death Eater in nothing but..." She too trailed off, clamping down on her lower lip as laughter shook her. "I-I figured it was a suitable punishment for trying to h-hex me..."

Yet again the girl had completely surprised him, a sudden horrible realization striking him.

"Remind me to never incense you again."

She inclined an eyebrow skeptically. "Somehow I doubt you'll be able to accomplish that feat."

"Then I'll steal your wand."

Instantly all humor faded, an uneasy expression he did not prefer replacing it.

"I'm sorry." He apologized quickly, lowering his voice. "It's just I thought you couldn't..."

"Do anything without it?" She finished for him.

Meekly he nodded.

She frowned sadly, "Pretty much. Three months... Three months of practice and the only bloody thing I can honestly do on my own is stun..."

For some reason his hand found its way to her hood, pulling it over her head once again. Her phrase forgotten she observed him curiously, as he unconsciously began tucking her hair beneath it.

"Best not to let anyone recognize you then." He spoke softly, slower than normal, an unnatural, unexplainable protectiveness overcoming him. "And besides, it would be a shame to not leech all of the use you can get out of this lovely fashion statement you acquired."

"You're thinking they won't attack me if they see me in this."

He nodded quickly, eliciting a softening of her previously strained expression.

"Well you're right." She provided. "That's how I got across the road to you. I walked right past two of them."

"Clever Kaylens, who would have thought." He chided, smiling at the slight smile he saw forming again. It was funny how he could incense her one moment and make her smile the next, all the while with Death Eaters hovering dangerously close. Somehow the thought of this brought a pleasant sensation he was not eager to lose, despite his inability to define it.

She stared at him, features bathed in the gray shadows of her hood, mouth slightly open as if caught off guard. "You know I can't decide if I should take that as a compliment or not."

He grinned, "Take it as whatever you want, just don't steal my trousers."

She visibly shuddered. "Trust me, I left those on him."

"Good. Because frankly, if you had messed with a Death Eater's trousers, to extract revenge or not, I think I may have had to wipe your memory clean for your own good."

She looked positively appalled, her intended retort forever remaining unspoken, for at that moment the light wrinkling of leaves underfoot froze them both, Harry's hand instinctively gripping his wand as he mouthed for her to go.

She was already moving, only dragging him with her, his wrist in a firm vice grip as if he were her captive. Keeping close to the magically erected edifices of commerce they kept to the shadows, knowing that her dark hood would merit a second glance before any attack would be made upon them.

Like a labyrinth the next alley's egress appeared, but a swift shake of her head cautioned him to run past it's opening with her, avoiding whatever perceived dangers lay down it. And so they walked,

traversing the winding outskirts of Hogsmeade's commercial properties, until the second to last alley was encountered.

Peering down it's empty stretch they entered, the stench hitting them only after.

Foul excrement and feces, bile and refuse, all of it assaulted their senses without apology, as if it's source was freshly released.

It wasn't until his foot had knocked hard into the body that he realized it's source.

The dull red hair, the characteristic freckles...

The lifeless face of Seamus Finnigan stared up at him.

For one agonizing moment he froze, muscles failing to obey his commands, nerves failing to fire, heart stuttering.

"No..."

His mind denied it even before his strangled vocalization. Seamus couldn't be dead. He couldn't.

Though there was no denying the blank, open eyed stare of the Irish boy staring forever up into the heavens, just as there was no way of getting around the stench, for eventually the loss of control of a corpse's muscular system allows for the release of such foul things.

Recognizing the soiled soil around his dorm mate, it occurred to him that Seamus had been dead for quite some time.

Someone's hand wrapped around his own, squeezing gently.

"Come on. We can't do anything for him." A soft voice whispered, her request heeded only as she applied pressure to him, pulling him up from the dent his knees had left in the dirt. At some point he had fallen there, besides the second student to meet the fate his parents had.

In that moment everything changed.

He had been wrong. How stupid was he, believing for even a moment that the Death Eaters would hesitate to kill...

How many more bodies lay lifelessly sprawled upon the ground this cold day?

A slow burning, ominous rage began to simmer.

"There!"

The Death Eater's voice rang out from the opposite end of the alley, echoing down its length, echoing louder and louder, mirroring the intense animosity rising louder and louder within him.

Merlin only knew how long they had been standing there, observed and unaware, allowing Seamus' lifeless body to distract them from saving their own lives.

Saving...

Deep within the depths of his ailing conscious, all concern for the sparing of life of anyone in the tunic of the Dark Lord fled, and his upturned wand unleashed the most powerful stunner he could muster, as less effective stunning spells streamed steadily from Kaylens cherry wood wand besides him.

They couldn't remain exposed in the open like this, mere sitting ducks...

Driving his shoulder into hers, knocking her to the side, they tumbled behind a metal bin. Kaylens swore besides him, grabbing her shoulder in clear pain, but there was no time to think on it.

CLANG!

CLANG! CLANG!

The onslaught of curses were pounding against the bin, rattling the thick metal as if it were mere tin foil, a corner of the bin already melting over...

CLANG!

His wand smacked hard against their temporary blockade, strengthening it with a shielding charm Hermione had taught him. There was no noticeable reaction, but the Death Eater's stunning spells now bounced from it as if they were mere pebbles, no longer clanging as if they were small boulders.

Glancing at Kaylens their eyes connected, the silent question of if they were each okay passing and answered before both their wands, her's however insufficient, re-turned upon their assailants.

She wedged her wand in the minuscule gap between the bin and the brick wall, blasting stunners in a straight path along it, actually hitting home as one of the men pressed himself against the wall in an attempt to avoid Harry's cast hex.

That Death Eater fell groaning and disoriented to the ground, yet the pale faced man was clearly still conscious. The wrinkling of Kaylens' nose evidenced her displeasure at this, since the other Death Eater was no longer in their line of sight.

It took a second for Harry to realize that the only other spot to shelter behind at that end of the alley lay directly beneath another gutter.

Flashing Kaylens a deviant grin he aimed, the oddly silent sound of the spell striking overpowered by the ear splitting sound of the now dangling gutter dragging across the brick siding like a pendulum.

"That was my idea." She hissed above the racket.

The gutter finally broke free from it's precarious hold upon the thatched roof, landing directly atop where the other assailant had lain in wait.

The man's screams reverberated down the alley with sickening clarity.

"Complaining?" He asked smugly.

Shaking her head she scowled. "You still owe me one."

"Fair enough."

Unfortunately the refreshing sound of the Death Eater's screams were attracting notice, because no sooner had that pair of goons been taken care of than the sound of another pair of footsteps sprinting across the leaves resounded. Only this time the person was coming from the back allies.

Sharing a glance with Kaylens all pretenses at humor once again left, both mutually acknowledged that their retreat could not occur in that direction, and together they took off down the length of the alley, passing the disoriented Death Eaters just before the alley ended, pouring them out onto the wide expanse of Hogsmeade's main thoroughfare.

Marching down the leaf littered road was the fourth Death Eater that they had either heard or encountered in the spanse of less than a minute.

Bolting across the cobblestone road, passing this new champion of cruelty, Kaylens fell into step behind Harry, her wand leveled at him as if she were the one in pursuit, effectively blocking the newly appeared Death Eater from firing anything at him for risk of hitting a comrade in arms.

The tactic worked, for the Death Eater was already swearing in frustration as he reached another alley across the road.

This alley was dark, darker than any of the previous ones they had been down, for the boughs of the surrounding forest hung overhead it, bathing the buildings in refreshing shade during the summer, preventing the snow from accumulating on the roofs in winter, and providing a haven for all those seeking to conduct business of the illicit variety.

The alley was bathed in sinister shadows, but he had always liked the dark, and did not hesitate to turn down it, the pounding of their pursuers resonating in the breezy air behind them. Diving behind a group of haphazardly dumped trash bins the realization that Kaylens was no longer with him struck hard.

How had she fallen behind...

She rounded the corner, wand gone and the hood of her pilfered Death Eater cloak torn off, with the pale one's hand shooting out after her, catching her arm in a vicious grip.

He saw all of this through the trash bins, eyes widening at the malignant look shining beneath the pursuer's hood.

"You!" Snarled the man. "I killed you! How can yo..."

A loud howl broke from the goon's throat, the shadows darkening the alley having dulled the flash of the broken glass in her hand. Now the shard shone, reflecting the deep ruby red that could only stem from an artery.

The man's arm was spurting.

She whorled in her assailant's grasp, slashing his arm until the vice grip broke, sprinting down the long alley.

The Death Eater's wand was already firing after her, the hastily incanted shielding charm dying on Harry's lips as the dark light connected with her, sending her tumbling forward, scattering the leaves littering the alley's walkway in her wake.

Her tumultuous fall terminated directly in front of where he lay in wait, and wait he did, posed in a crouch, ready to spring...

"Broussard what have you done?" Another figure wearing the symbolic shroud of the devil himself rounded the corner, shouting furiously. "Our orders were not to kill! He's not going to be pleas..."

"She's supposed to be dead! I killed her!" Broussard's voice was tinged with hysteria, the spurting in his arm ceasing as the healing spell he had cast took effect.

Pale Broussard strode forward, arm's shaking, wand leveled at Kaylen's now coughing form.

The prickling of welling blood welled within Harry's hand, such was his grip upon his own glass shard.

"I'm ending this." Broussard hissed dangerously, Harry silently counting his steps.

One.

Two.

One more...

Broussard passed the gap between the bins, and he sprang from the shadows, throwing his arm around the tall man's neck, slashing savagely as he yanked away, falling to the ground besides Kaylens, the hot squirt of blood splashing them both as Broussard's severed carotid collapsed.

Rolling to his back, 11 inches of Holly already cocked and aimed, the killing curse flew at the other man.

The thud of the Death Eater's body hitting the ground, the cessation of the other's desperate gurgling, brought him no joy.

Only satisfaction.

His attention jolted from the carnage to where she lay besides him, clutching her chest, the soft lines of her eyes screwed up in pain.

"You know Potter..." She gasped, chest heaving as if restrained. "I hate...when yo...you're right."

"Right? Right about what?" He asked, arms shaking, the disjointed caliber of her speech chilling him. "Kaylens are you..."

"About...n-not being...taking care of...myself..." Her voice faded, a hacking cough resuming.

"Damn't..." He hissed, casting a furtive glance at their surroundings, hating the undeniable vulnerability of their present situation. Two stiffs and an injured comrade.

The foul odor was already rising from the fresh carcasses...

"Hey..." He whispered, forcing the panic from his voice as he smoothed away her wind strewn hair. "I'm going to move you okay?"

She nodded weakly, and he felt her hands curling around the folds of his cloak, grasping onto him for support as he lifted her away from the fallen Death Eater, hauling her across the blood stained dirt into the shadowy recess he had been sheltering in before.

Setting her down, supported only by his arms, he brushed her golden hair aside. "What were you hit with?" His urgency was barely concealed, his eyes searching her countenance and body for any sign, anything at all, to indicate what possible curse could be running its course within her.

"I... d-don't know..."

The adrenaline of earlier fell away, ceasing to fuel him any longer, the first fledglings of fright creeping into him at her faltering words.

She appeared unnaturally deprived of breath. "Kaylens..."

"H-harry..." Her scarcely uttered words left her looking strained. "It hurts..."

His insides froze, breath catching within his throat as he eased her to lay upon the ground. "What hurts?"

The sound of his low, urgent voice terrified him nearly as much as the stiffening of her slender arms beneath his hold.

"Crushing..." She gasped. "Can't... Breath..." Her lips parted as if trying to speak further, emitting only a gasp, her fists coiling tightly around the folds of his cloak.

Crushing... His mind sought frenzically through his scanty repertoire of dark curses, limited only to the texts he had borrowed from Dumbledore's collection.

...some are capable of crushing the air from it's victim's lungs....

"Verpletterend adem..." He whispered, the horrible realization pressing down upon him like a Hypogriff.

She had been hit with a crushing hex, and it would slowly drive the air from her lungs, killing her...

Her breathing was shallow, coming in short, quick bursts of hyperventilation, her chest barely rising...

"Kaylens..." He murmured. "Stay calm okay? You need to relax...."

Weakly she nodded, her paling complexion striking evidence to her pressing need for air.

The counter curse.... It relieved the crushing hex...

A choked whimper distracted him, drawing him to the distracting pallor of her skin.

"Kaylens please..." He pleaded desperately, knowing he was losing her, yet helpless as her eyes took on a glossy quality, flickering aimlessly. "Focus on me." He whispered, tilting her face until she was looking upon him in the dark light. "Look at me okay? Please..."

She was shaking now, her face growing cool to the touch, mouth flapping wordlessly...

"Come on Kaylens! Talk to me! Please!" He hissed frantically, feeling her body stiffening besides him, her hands, once clutching onto him

so tightly, releasing his cloak, reaching to grasp blindly at her slender throat...

"No!" He voiced unconsciously, capturing her hand within the confines of his own. "Breath for me... Just breath..."

Her free arm rose, frantically clawing, clutching onto him, flailing weakly as he fought to calm her.

"Stop! Kaylens please ..." He continued pleading, knowing she would not comply, though her oxygen was depleting, her last reserves were being used to fight him irrationally. "Don't fight me..."

Her hands began clawing frantically, her back arching up from the dirt strewn ground as panic tore through her.

Precious seconds were being lost... He had to keep her from fighting him as he worked.

He caught her arms, capturing them in the strong grip normally reserved for the struggling Snitch alone. His forearms strained against her, his decision made as he swung his leg over her waist, straddling her, forcing her fragile wrists down into the rough grime of the alley, pinning them beneath his knees. Her hips rose, pressing into him, against him, but his hands were now freed.

His mind roamed quickly, desperately, searching through the counter curses, seeking and falling upon one he was unsure of, though there was no time left for hesitation.

"Stay with me please..." He whispered shakily, unbuttoning her cloak, allowing it to fall free, revealing the fleecy wool of a well worn sweater.

His hands found their way to her chest, pressing upon either side to hover above where her lungs lay, his wand carefully gripped between. Her hair lay splayed haphazardly around her head, her tangled mane not concealing the sweat trickling upon her damp brow, nor the dampness soaking her exposed skin above her collar line.

Her grip upon his trouser legs was loosening, her rigid hands growing limp as her chest's heaving grew indiscernible, arousing far more than panic within him.

Her body was no longer writhing beneath his own, her eyes flickering shut...

"Please let this work..." He pleaded, his softly uttered request beseeching her to hold on.

Closing his eyes he allowed the tip of his wand to tilt down, touching her skin, damp with perspiration, just above her collar line. His hands remained upon her chest, all concentration contorted into the effort of relieving the pressure upon her.

"Sterk Ademendum..." He finally whispered, hoping against hope enough of his will was behind it, for the crushing hex's counter curse was reliant upon strength of will, much like the Unforgiveables.

Wandless magic coupled with force of will...

He had never before attempted such a feat.

The gentle blue mist poured from his hands, cascading across her like an opaque fog, seeping into her skin, before finally fading from sight.

His hand sought hers, finding her, clutching onto her tightly, running his thumb across her chilly skin, a silent mantra pouring from his lips. "Please Kaylens... Come on..." He implored, silently beseeching the gods to spare her strength enough to last as the counter curse ran its course.

He was murmuring desperately, caressing her cheek, for her head had lolled to the side to rest in his hand.

He was watching her, searching for something, anything, to indicate success.

“Just hang on...” He pleaded, eyes falling closed in despair. They had lost someone already. No one else... “Just a little longer... Stay with me...”

The slight shuddering of her body beneath him, so slight he feared it a product of the wind, drew his eyes open once more.

Her lips were parting, a shallow breath being drawn between them.

His heart thudded, for her fingers still remained limp within the confines of his own.

“Come on Kaylens... One more time...”

This time her chest rose, ever so slightly, as if the pressure upon it were slowly being released by a cruelly slow force.

His hand traced along her neck, feeling for the gentle throbbing within it, finding her pulse beating weakly...

Gulping hard, his hand returned to her face, gently turning her head until the scarce sunlight of the alley fell upon it. Her airway would not be restricted. Tres had taught them that much, for it was easiest to breathe when the chin was directly in line with the chest.

It seemed another eternity passed, but she was breathing, shallowly, but it was something. His fingers grazed her cheeks, ensuring that her head remained in place as her chest began rising with more and more regularity, each gasp of replenishing life air fueling her alertness.

Her eyes flickered slightly, the small sign betraying him, his body unconsciously shaking in relief as he felt her hand squeezing back gently against his own.

"Kaylens..." He murmured breathlessly, only now exhaling the breath he had been unconsciously holding.

Feebly she nodded, lips parted as her breath came ever more steadily. Long moments passed, his eyes glued upon her, watching the color returning slowly to her features. First the unnatural tinge to

her lips fading, light pink replacing ghostly gray, then the vague warmth to her skin rising slowly along her cheekbones.

"H-harry..." His name came from between her parted lips, the ghost of a sound escaping on a whispered breath.

"Shh... Don't say a word." He hushed, running his sleeve across her damp brow, waiting for the hitching of her breath to once again fall under control.

No acknowledgment was necessary save for the tightening of her hand around his, the tapping upon his leg conveying how his knee still uncomfortably rested upon her other arm.

A light, amused smile escaped him at the realization. "You needed to sit up anyway." He whispered, sliding down and off her legs, recollecting her into his arms. Gathering her against his chest he allowed her slender form to collapse against him, her leaf strewn hair tickling his nose as he gratefully breathed her earthy scent in.

"Thank God." He murmured, burying his face into her hair, clinging to her still shaking form. "I was so scared the counter curse wouldn't work..."

Weak fingers clung loosely to him, her soft panting his only response. Unconsciously he found his hands tangling in her hair, combing through her tangled tresses, giving in to his burning urge to touch, to feel her presence directly beneath his hands.

Somehow, the feel of her chest heaving against him relieved him in a way that just the sight of her breathing could not.

"Thanks..." Her welcomed breath was tracing across his neck, increasing the involuntary quivering of his own muscles.

"That's one you owe me now..." He informed her, his fingers catching around a bright auburn leaf, carefully extracting it from behind her ear.

He felt a small tremor course through her. "You're still counting?" She whispered, the hint of a smile upon her tone.

She had tones...

He clung to her tighter, unsure of his sudden need for physical contact. "Have to stay ahead of you somehow..." He muttered lightly, relishing the way her chest rose against his in light laughter.

"Back to bickering then..." Came her breathless response.

He nodded, turning her face until her hazy eyes peered into his own. "I guess so." He murmured, studying her. "But we're still in a bit of a predicament. Do you think you can stand?"

She smiled wanly. "I'm exhausted, not immobilized."

He returned her smile warmly, pressing his forehead against her own. "Good." He murmured, his nose rubbing against her own. "Because I'm not carrying you."

"Like I would let you."

He chuckled softly at the light rasp to her voice, a light object breaking free from his neck at that moment, falling onto their intertwined laps.

In the preceding scuffle the Kunnskap must have snapped, for the miniature pensive had fallen, landing on Kaylens' outstretched legs, it's chain dangling onto his own.

Kaylens' fingers wrapped around it, a bemused expression tracing her features. "Never pictured you as one for necklaces..."

He scowled, taking the chain between his own fingers, fully intending to reclaim his property, when the intense snapping of twigs and crackling of leaves, as if a sudden scuffle in a fall pile had been engaged, rose up from the forest.

Thump.

The forest only an alley's length away from where they sat.

Thump.

His fist clenched around his wand, concealing it between them. He wanted to move, but he knew she was in too a fragile state to move quickly enough.

Another sound met his ears.

Growling...

Tumbling into the alley were two fully grown werewolves, one's fangs firmly imbedded into the hide of the other, hauling it away while the other struggled savagely against it.

His eyes, as were hers, were riveted to the desperate struggle before them, only now he was acting, hauling her to her feet, not bothering to wonder why there were werewolves in the day, with one acting protectively, rather than savagely.

There was not enough time.

The savage beast broke free, tearing down the alley for them, the other snarling in it's wake, thundering after it.

As it lunged for the kill, a hex to fling silver particles emerged from his wand to meet it, and Harry had just enough time to feel the sharp pull behind his belly button, comprehending that it came from the Kunnskap, still clutched between he and Kaylens hands.

Only after they landed, entangled in one another, did it occurred to him that the Kunnskap had doubled as an emergency portkey, only activated during mortal peril.

Dumbledore you clever man.

Thank Merlin Kaylens had been holding on as well.

"Just as courage imperils life, fear protects it."
Leonardo da Vinci

Chapter 23 Ghosts of the Past

It was sickening... The way the dull warmth encompassed him, bewitching him, making him a slave to the cruel comfort it provided as it crept across his deadened skin like thousands of slithering serpents, their tongue like lashings reawakening his numbed cellular capacities with frightening vigor.

Until the nauseating warmth had found him, he had been nonfunctional, his systems systematically shutting down, one by one, heedless of his subconscious' frantic protestations.

Such was the effect of severe head injuries...

Now he was only dimly aware of the harsh sounds reverberating through the room, and the voice, inexplicable in dialect and tongue, it's only comprehensible feature a grating hiss, filling his senses.

The little man pounding upon the interior of his skull with his rather large sledgehammer banged with frenzied desperation, his mind crying out painfully for it to all end. Yet the pain had been his only constant, his only sanity to the madness that was now his existence.

Dean Thomas sought release, his eyes blearily opening to witness a hellish glory, one to which his private pain paled in comparison. No amount of dark splotches clouding his vision could obscure the sight before him, nor the serpent slithering across his numbed legs, pinning his body to the cold, uncomfortable tiled floor.

The vestiges of hind limbs protruding from the serpent's body, like small spurs, were dragging across his calves with suffocating force, it's sheer width freezing his blood that miraculously still ran, no longer pooling upon the floor around his bandaged skull.

The convulsing struck hard and suddenly, his body lurching beneath the serpent's weight unsuccessfully, the turn of his head his only

salvation, saving him from drowning within the expelled contents of his own stomach.

The hissing again... The pressure was leaving, his body finally able to roll free upon the crimson slicked floor in his dizzying haze.

He fell right into the man, the dark length of cloak swaying against his face, Hermione's choked gargles registering within his mind.

With the trepidation of one who has never been through hell, his dark eyes rose, fixating upon Hermione's normally articulate lips, as the serpents large length exerted it's suffocating force around her small frame, coiling in tighter and tighter concentric circles around her gasping body...

The deep browned scales trailed away from her distressed body, covering everything in sight, the very floor appearing alive with the serpent's slightest movement, it's length impossible to discern due to the sheer vastness of it's intercoiling...

His eyes fell upon Amarante's unconscious body, upon the snake dragging over and across Neville's chest...

A powerful force clenched around his chin, and against his will the sorcery forced his neck to tilt back, his vertebrae crunching together, dangerously close to snapping as he stared at the creature commanding his very will.

Deadened, slit like eyes met him.

The hunt was on.

The wolf's nails shredded the fallen leaves, it's claws digging into the mud soaked forest floor, wet clumps of grass scattering in it's wake. The only sound breaking the still death of the little traveled forest the harsh pounding of the small packs feet.

The others were spreading out, winding amidst the trees with the inborn agility known only to hunters.

The scent of live flesh had been detected upon the crisp breeze snaking through the village only moments before, and now the pack was on the hunt, searching for the escaped soul.

No humans were to leave the village.

None alive...

They were to be protected within it's walls, but once the borders had been breached, everything changed.

The wolf would not again stray from the growled orders of the elder. The searing warmth welling from it's wounds, issuing from where the elder had fought against him, depriving him of the tantalizing taste of the two fresh specimens was severe reminder of what happened to the disobedient.

Now it's taste had been thoroughly satiated upon the rich flesh of the fallen, leaving the wolf to revel in the stringy tissue caught between it's incisors, torn from the fresh corpses that had lain in pools of their own barely coagulated fluids.

The tormenting taste had been satisfying, yet it only served to renew it's thirsty desperation for live quarry.

The last pair had evaded it, leaving it to feast upon the newly deceased. It knew this, for blood coagulated firmly within mere minutes, and no clotting had passed along the wolf's tongue as it had feasted, it's tongue so deluded by the taste, deluded by the thirst it had so yearned for...

The wounds the wolf had sustained against the elder, fighting for it's quarry, were trivial in comparison to it's now satisfied hunger, for the blood of the dead stiffened the fur lining it's snout, it's tongue lapping at it, yearning for just one more taste...

It was then that the wolf spotted it's new quarry, a flash of red penetrating it's retinas from atop the human's head. The elder's guttural growls signified it too had spotted the prey, it's growls urging the wolf's mitts to pound in a faster rhythm, a deep snarl issuing from it's own throat, penetrating the late afternoon silence.

No humans were to escape the village... None alive...

For it they were not within the wards when the spell commenced... Then they were as good as dead anyway.

The elder leapt, it's first thrust of fangs deftly dodged as the prey spun around the base of a trunk, it's evasive maneuver effective.

The elder was sent skidding across the slippery leaves, and the novice wolf's indignation resonated cruelly within the forest, it's growl heard by all near.

Stalking through the leaves the wolf hunted, rearing upon it's haunches as the human leapt in the air, clawing at a low hung bough.

It was a single flash of the human's hair that caused the wolf's hesitation.

Familiarity...

The human hung precariously, gangly feet swinging in a long arc, it's wand hand free and aiming as the elder sprung again, not dodging the bright light emitting from the human's wand in time.

As the elder fell to the forest floor, howling as if hell itself had clawed at it's very soul, all familiarity was forgotten. The wolf became entirely savage, giving into it's carnal desires once again as it leapt in defense, fangs bared...

The human's foot connected harshly with it's long skull, but not before it's teeth had sunk into the man's flesh, it's gene altering phages passing into the bloodstream of the now screaming human.

The man would not be human for long.

Together they crashed to the forest floor, the human's wand breaking from it's grasp, disappearing amongst the broken branches strewn across the earth.

It was then, as the wolf leapt upon the downed adversary, it's claws digging into it's quarry's chest, that the gnawing familiarity within it's mind clamped down hard.

He had bitten a human...

A sickening feeling rose up within the wolf.

The man's freckled face was screwed up in pain, yet the man's confusion regarding the wolf's hesitation to finish him off was clearly reflected within the blue depths of the human's eyes.

The wolf's stomach churned, the thoroughly quenched taste finally allowing it to reclaim it's mind, and the elder was limping towards them both, snarling menacingly.

The elder's savage intent was clear.

Sliding from the man's chest, the wolf turned on the elder, conveying the necessity to not kill this particular quarry.

Moments later the writhing body of the red headed man was being drug across the splintering ground of the Forbidden Forest, back into the ghost town of Hogsmeade.

The man that had fought against the carnal savagery of his darker side, had finally lost. The evidence of his failed battle lay in the unconscious form of the red headed student that he had dumped on the outskirts of town.

What the wolf did not know, was that the unnatural chill passing over him was the final incantation being cast upon the village, and all within it.

Phase one was nearing completion.

"Now that you have joined us..."

The creature spoke with derision, the sudden pressure upon his face releasing, sending his head snapping into the floor with catapulted force.

The crunching of his jarred nose, nor his pained groans, was paid no mind.

"The pain you are feeling shall recede in time Mr. Thomas." Voldemort hissed. "It is only natural after such injury. Your skull was in need of immediate attention."

Lifting his head, barely capable of eliciting a muscular response from his arms, his sleeve drew up, wiping the fresh blood from his face.

The movement was disagreeable, the furious retching of his torso indicative as further contents of his stomach expelled across the floor.

Voldemort merely raised the dark hem of his cloak, avoiding the putrid stench puddling dangerously close to his unsoiled robes.

"I am afraid..." It hissed, "That my methods have rather unpleasant side effects, which you are presently experiencing."

His skull pounded, the poisonous words filtering in, his heart pounding against his ribcage as the vilest of villains kneeled before where he lay sprawled like an infant, face down in his own mess.

Again his head fell under the control of sorcery, turning to stare the inhuman creature in the eye.

There he found no warmth, only lethal persuasion.

"I trust I have your understanding in that."

Dean did not nod, he could not, yet his head bobbed in response, his jawbone striking the floor with each successive drop.

"Ah... Good." Voldemort derided. "I do so value obedience Mr. Thomas, it was a trait your father lacked. How curious that it would pass to his precious son."

Dean's loathsome expression morphed into something far more bitter, his angry gaze glaring recklessly at the creature grinning rather amusedly.

"But of course... You wouldn't have known would you?"

The man with the sledgehammer pounded relentlessly, threatening to crack his barely healed skull, but the vein throbbing within his neck pulsed with furious intensity.

"What would you know about my father?" He spat, blood colored spittle running down his lip.

Voldemort's wand waved lazily, the pungent mess dissipating from the floor as the creature squatted down, eyeing him with an air of superiority. "Everything Mr. Thomas. Everything."

He swallowed hard, choking back another wave of sheer revulsion, Hermione's weak breathing ringing within his ears. How could this monster know anything of his father, when he, himself, did not?

"Oh yes..." Voldemort continued, eyes glinting. "Your father was powerful, but treacherous... In the end, his refusal to obey orders was not something that could be tolerated."

Dean was shaken. His father... The one person he had so assiduously sought to find... Yet not one fact, not one whisper, had been imparted onto him from his otherwise loving mother.

There had been no contact since birth. It was the only knowledge he bore besides from the dark anger, the hollow feeling of abandonment that he harbored below his jovial exterior.

And now the vilest of creatures was telling him what his mother had been unable to.

His father had been a wizard. He was not Muggleborn after all, and yet, this new knowledge changed nothing, save to fuel his anger.

"What did you do to him?" He practically growled, raising as best he could from the floor, ignoring the snake's threatening hissing.

The creature's pale lips tightened in a cruel line. "What was necessary. Once he met that filthy Muggle mother of yours he could no longer be trusted."

Understanding crossed Dean's face, the knowledge of what had happened sinking in.

The red eyed beast merely nodded. "Oh yes... You know now. He tried to run, to spare you and your mother the fate he had in store, yet in the end we found him." The slit like eyes narrowed further, disappearing into his skull. "We always find them."

"You killed him..." He was shaking, fists curling into tight balls, Hermione's protestations ringing in his ears, yet miraculously unheard.

"He chose his own fate, foolishly leaving our cause in pursuit of family." Voldemort stood, pacing, the snake slithering to allow his master room to move. "If I had been wiser, I would have realized the importance of such things to fools, but now..."

The red eyed, bipedal snake turned on his heel, staring him down. "Now Mr. Thomas, I do. For fools shall risk their lives for such things, however irrational it is."

His eyes drifted past the snake of a man, fixating upon Hermione. Her dark, exhausted eyes held his, holding the look of defiance, even as a flick of the serpent's muscular tail sent her small form slumping against the wall, her features contorted in sheer agony.

"Nagini that is enough."

The reptile's head, perilously close to Hermione's, turned slowly to regard her master, her diamond plated tail flicking lazily near Neville's feet.

Such was the serpents length that even stretching the length of the restroom, coiling and winding through the stalls, that there was enough scaly surface left over to wind tightly around Hermione, binding the girl effectively.

A forked tongue slid out, Voldemort's grating, hissing words filling the air with the extension of it's dagger like teeth, a milky fluid exuding from them until a small drop fell to the floor.

Splat.

The reality of the toxins within that small drop struck him harder than the blow that had fractured his skull, for it would take only a single order from Voldemort, and the serpent would strike.

She could kill them all, and Voldemort would never have to lift a finger.

As if reading his thoughts, Voldemort flicked a long, pale finger towards Hermione, and he swore to God the serpent actually grinned.

Beneath the folds of her worn sweater, the subtle chill of the dew stained, muddied ground seeped in. The crinkling of half dried leaves beneath her, and the glittering light streaming through the forest canopy, it's dull warmth caressing her cheeks, all urged Kalliandra to stir upon the familiar forest floor.

Her hazy eyes flitted open, afternoon light spilling into them, revealing the moss covered ground that stretched endlessly outward, broken only by the countless trees rising up from it's surface. Drawing a deep, strained breath, she relaxed into the earth, her body conforming around the small rocks and twigs, and the shimmering, fallen leaves that lay in chaotic order around she and the messy haired man that had crashed to the earth with her.

The light breeze strewing golden strands haphazardly across her face, tickling her nose, was disregarded in light of the relief exploding through her. The numbness of before, the horrific, paralytic sensation of seeing the wolf's fangs poised and bared as Potter had thrown himself between she and the creature...

All her fear was forgotten, for the reassuring warmth of his arm, laying across her waist, was finally seeping in.

He was okay... That damnable, overbearing, poster boy of idiocy was with her.

She was beginning to lose count of the utterly brash things he had done in her presence, but the feel of him stirring sent her informal count right out the window.

His legs were moving, further entangling with her own, and for once she found she did not mind.

A breath of relief escaped her lips, a choked laugh falling from his own. His face turned in the dirt, falling inches from her own, his dazed eyes reflecting the surprise filtering through both their veins.

He had thrown himself in front of death's blade once again, to protect her...

The bastard was alright...

She flung her arms around him, ignoring the stiffening of his body, clinging to him as if doing so would vanquish the frightening reality of what his idiocy had nearly cost.

He was shaking... The realization that she cared was something for which she was ill prepared, but the feeling of his arms instinctually gathering around her, clinging back with equal desperation, drove the suddenly inconsequential fear from her mind.

They were no longer upon the ground, for his fists were tangling in her sweater, clutching her needingly. His arms were clumsily gathering her against his chest, pulling her closer, and she obliged,

falling against him till her face was buried in the tangled folds of his cloak, the rhythmic rising of his chest reassuring her of his safety.

His safety... The brash fool... She would hex him if she only could...

She too was trembling, the unwelcome sensation enticing her arms to wind tighter around his neck. He responded with equal fever, pulling her onto his curled up legs as he leaned back, their awkward, backwards descent halting only as his back connected with the trunk of a tree, its rough bark scraping beneath her hands which burrowed within his untamable hair, his own rising to intertwine in her own.

The relief flooding through her was unnerving, her silence bought only by the stunned astonishment coursing through her as his face tilted down, falling to burrow within the tousled tresses winding past her shoulders.

It was too much for her. After blocking so much out for so very long... One like her wasn't meant to feel, yet the relief flowing through her was undeniable. Everything was undeniable, yet she would deny it for as long as she could, and his calloused fingers running along her neck, trailing across her face as it fell, burying into his neck, were testing her reserves.

Damn him... Damn him and his recklessness. Damn him and his self righteous protectiveness. She wasn't supposed to be concerned about anyone, yet now she was.

His cloak was catching in the weathered bark of the tree, she could feel it as he shifted beneath her, the tightening of his arms silently conveying his desire for her to not move. She gratefully remained, breathing him in as he adjusted, the salty scent lingering upon his collar overwhelming her senses almost maddeningly in the meantime.

She could no longer see a thing besides from him, the king of idiocy, yet insanely it was all she needed.

"Damn you Potter..." She whispered falteringly. For once in her life her words were failing to speak her mind, the quality of her voice betraying it instead.

A solitary hand remained intertwined in her soft locks, brushing them away from her veiled face, one by one.

"That's the second time you've done that..." She breathed shakily, not content to let his brashness go so easily. "What the hell were you thinking..."

"Actually..." He whispered, the tip of his nose caressing her cheek, his head tilting against her own so his breath traced along her skin. "I wasn't."

Despite herself, her soft laughter was there, enticing his arms to wind even tighter around her slender form. "You're an idiot Potter..." She whispered, her light admonishment tracing across his neck, the shaking of his arms fiercely felt as a hand fell to her waist.

His hand found her chin, cupping it, forcing her face to turn to his own. "So..." He murmured, forest colored eyes conveying his conflictions. "A thank you wouldn't be coming anytime soon then?"

She shook her head, willing her eyes to shut, yet feeling their failure. "Not a chance."

A sad smile graced his face. "So nothing has changed."

Again her voice was catching. "Pr-precisely."

His entire expression faltered, his forest colored eyes betraying a sad hint of amusement. "Stuttering Kaylens..." He whispered, hand sliding from her chin, tracing her cheekbone. "First annoying, then clever, then stuttering... How much do you expect me to take?"

Her gaze held his, the severe weight of the sadness in his own seeping through to her. "How much can you?" She softly questioned.

His throat rose rhythmically, his swallow not fully masking the choked sound emitting from his throat. "Not a lot..." He whispered truthfully, pulling her towards him until they again clung to one another.

In the empty forest, far from where Seamus had fallen, far from the overwhelmed Hogsmeade, and far from Hogwarts, they clung to the only comfort they had.

Each other.

Hermione was gone.

Gone...

He had taken her, the snake smacking her beaten face into the wall, and there had been no amount of knowledge or bravery that could prevent it from happening.

There were times when sheer knowledge failed in the face of the upper hand, and Dean now knew this, for Hermione Granger, cleverest witch of their year, had fallen prey to the python that had clamped its teeth through her clothing, dragging her from the room and into the village's streets.

The monster wasn't killing her, he was keeping her.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

Dean's dark eyes fixated upon the monster, hating him with renewed passion, for until this moment he had been miraculously sheltered from the villain's treachery.

Or at least he had thought so.

"My father was not a Death Eater." He spat dangerously, realizing the futility of protestation, yet not caring.

Voldemort practically smiled, "The biggest mistake one can make is in failing to believe the truth, when it is dangled right in front of them."

Turning to him the creature continued, its thick accentuation betraying the speech of one ill suited to the language of man.

His kind preferred their own speech, the speech of those that slithered upon their bellies.

"You my boy, are not Muggleborn." Voldemort hissed, fixing his glare upon him. "Your thoughts may be tainted, but your blood is pure."

He shook his head vigorously, "No, not according to you, because my mother's blood runs through my veins." Voldemort's face was narrowing in disgust, and Dean took his time announcing his next words. "Her filthy, Muggle stained, blood."

The creature's tone was deathly quiet, "Your father was a pureblood, as are you. There is nothing left to consider on the matter."

Dean could only stare, hating the unquestioning look upon the creature's face.

"Your thoughts have been tainted Mr. Thomas. Indeed... they have. Yet once you know the truth, you'll come to realize exactly who has tainted them."

Paralyzing fear flowed through him, preventing him from saying a word of dissent as Voldemort's dictation continued.

"I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that I desire your death for your filthy maternal parentage, yet you are wrong."

No he wasn't... Dean knew enough to know that, yet the creature continued, heedless of the disbelieving look within his eyes.

"I ask you, would I have saved your life, healed your skull, if I were truly an enemy?" Voldemort's searching gaze roamed over him, penetrating far deeper than his outer layer of skin, for he could almost hear the villain's thoughts resonating within his mind.

"You feel it don't you Mr. Thomas." He leaned forward, eagerness written across his face. "You can feel your fear dissipating. You know I am not your enemy, you know how I crave you as an ally."

Dean Thomas stared into the face of evil, unwilling to believe the words pouring from the serpent's mouth, his own only able to form a single word through the penetrating persuasion ringing through his mind.

"Why?"

"Because you are powerful, as was your treacherous father." Voldemort replied, circling his kneeling form. "And because you're alone. Alone as we all are. I can feel how strongly you desire to see the truth, the truth as I once saw it."

The monster's words were no longer discernible from his own, at least not to him. He could no longer tear his eyes from Voldemort's, such was the power reverberating there.

"Make a choice my child. Make your choice and I shall free you from this prison."

"No prison...There's no..."

"Oh but there is. You like so many before you just fail to see it. Yet tell me, why do the powerful hide from the filthy Muggles when we should rule? The Muggles, weak as they are, have imprisoned us into our shrouds of secrecy."

Dean could not remove his eyes from the man, his jumbled words making little sense.

"For... For their safety..."

"NO!" The serpent's roar nearly destroyed him, sending him crumbling pathetically to the floor.

It was then that the eye contact was broken. It was then that the Legilimency, the persuasive power of suggestion that Voldemort had mastered, ended.

"We hide from them for our own safety! Muggles would kill our kind without a second glance if only presented with the opportunity!"

The entire room shook as a stall door slammed in the creature's anger.

"It is my job to see to it that that never happens. The preservation of our species is at stake, and it is us against them Mr. Thomas! The sooner you see it the safer you shall be!"

For reasons he could barely begin to comprehend, Dean eyes remained rigidly upon the floor. "W-why are you telling me this?"

"Because your mind has not been made up. Because you may not be stupid enough as is that vile Mudblood Nagini is taking care of. Because I need eyes and ears to aid in the preservation of our species, and I think you are intelligent enough to understand the impotency of those foolish enough to stand besides that old fool that calls himself your Headmaster!"

Voldemort again surprised him, dropping to the floor in front of him, the neat folds of the creature's robes lost upon the dirty tile.

"We are at war Mr. Thomas, and soon you will be forced to choose a side. Today I have sought to ensure that those strong enough to do so know the truth. Now look at me!"

Again the invisible force forced his head upwards, the red eyes boring into his soul.

"Make your choice."

She shuddered, for it could not be stopped. No matter how tightly Tonks shut her eyes, the image of his flying body plagued her.

Sirius.

If only he were here, truly sitting before her as another ghost of her past presently was.

Only the ghost she desired to again see was far beyond her reach, lying in wait, beyond a veil that mere mortals could not penetrate. The price of accessing the mysteries Sirius was now privy to was one she was not yet willing to pay.

Not when Emily and Kenneth were gone, taken, just as she had been.

She had again, failed.

"An Auror risks their life everyday Nymphadora, but the frequency and brashness with which you throw yours around is far too frightening! Now tell me, do you intentionally choose the hopeless assignments or do you just have a knack for finding them?"

Kingsley's admonishments rung within her skull, her eyes barely focusing upon her captor, who sat upon the rich upholstery, calmly twirling Chardonnay within his crystalline goblet, urging her to indulge in one of her own.

She was far too intelligent to accept the alluring temptation that still sat, untouched, upon the mahogany table. A small ring of perspiration was darkening the rich wood where the goblet rested.

Lowering the ornate crystal ware from his lips, the ghost of Regulus Black examined her, alive and well.

"It's a shame we never got to know each other as children Nymphadora." His cultured voice informed. "Had we, then you might just realize that I am indeed trying to be hospitable, not poison you."

She swallowed nervously, the beating her skull had taken in the car crash had been further amplified by Regulus' stunner.

Such had been the price of her hesitation, the mistake of her misidentification.

"Forgive me for not trusting someone who felt the need to disarm me." She replied tartly, the absence of her wand weighing heavily upon her psyche.

Regulus' thin lips upturned into a strained smile. "Surely you must understand that I cannot fully trust you Nymphadora. I remember how hell bent you had once been on becoming an Auror, and now..." His eyes fell to the Ministry of Magic crest gracing her lapel. "It appears you have succeeded. I could not very well have your self-righteous side stunning me before we had a chance to...catch up."

Her dark eyes narrowed, all characteristic warmth long since fled. "Old times it is then Regulus. So tell me, how was it, killing Muggles at your masters bidding? I bet it wa..."

"Correction," He interrupted, taking a long, calculating sip of the deep red fluid. "I have only killed one Muggle, be it indirectly."

"I'm sure." She spat. "I bet you were disappointed your homicidal career failed to last longer. After all, you spent your whole life idolizing those cloaked in black wonders, but barely lasted a week amongst your precious Death Eaters."

Regulus stood, her narrowed eyes following his path to the end of the study.

"So what happened Reggie? Couldn't play with the big boys and girls when it came down to it? Weren't strong enough?"

His pale countenance peered above the goblet's rim unflinchingly. "You should not speak of things you know naught about."

"Oh but I know plenty Reggie. I may have been just a child when you left to join them but I knew enough."

"Then you would know how ill advised it is to speak of this so openly. And it is Regulus, I believe I told you to drop the Reggie name when you were four."

"Drop my given name and I'll learn to annunciate your full one."

An inclined eyebrow was her response, yet she paid it no mind. The pounding of her head was fading, and her eyes were already roaming across the room, regaining her bearings.

"If you are searching for your friends," Regulus' voice broke in observantly, "You will be glad to know they are fine. Their injuries were a bit more severe than your own, but they are presently in the guest suite, receiving some well needed rest."

Her confused expression fell onto him. "Why did you bring us here Regulus?"

He shrugged impassively, placing his wine glass onto the small table. "Clearly help was needed, and you were in no condition to provide it."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know it. You're wondering why your prejudicial cousin has risen from the grave, and instead of leaving your tainted self and your Muggle friends to rot in that ditch you had wound up in, helped you."

She eyed him crudely. "Well I was wondering why your corpse looked so undesiccated ."

Regulus threw his head back, a dry laugh escaping his throat, echoing off the dark paneling. "Ah... I was wondering when we would get to that."

Long minutes passed, the only sign of it's passage being the telltale ringing of the grandfather clock in the corner, as it struck upon yet another indiscernible hour of the night.

She must have been unconscious for hours before awakening upon the couch.

"You willingly helped Muggles. Why?"

He eyed her disdainfully. "I will admit, I harbored them no love, at a time. But you'd be surprised what living with them for sixteen years does to curtail one's distaste."

"So that's what you've been doing? Living as a Muggle?"

"In a manner of speaking."

She groaned, never allowing her eyes to leave her miraculously risen cousin. "For once, a straight answer Regulus."

He laughed hollowly, drumming his fingers across the small table. "The Death Eaters attempted to kill me Nymphadora, and I was a marked Death Eater to the Ministry."

He stood abruptly, her untrusting gaze following his path to the end of the study. "The Muggle world, ironically enough, was my only option for safety." He continued, stopping in front of a large, decorative mirror, his hands tussling his slicked hair. "I started again there."

"Regulus, there was a body. Your body."

He calmly re-adjusted a particularly out of place strand. One would never know, just by looking at the two, that they were discussing what a world had widely regarded as a celebrated death.

The death of a Death Eater had once been a widely rejoiced event.

"I was tipped off that my defection had angered certain...members. I fled barely in time, and when they finally found me, the plan to ensure my survival had already been set into motion."

From her spot upon the settee, she watched as his eyes studied his reflection, as if trying to decide if he liked what he saw beneath the surface...

"I had proffered a vial of Polyjuice potion, just enough to ensure the transformation of a single person. A single unfortunate soul..."

Her blood ran cold at his equally frozen words, for the ghost of the past that stood, staring at his own reflection, appeared to be coming undone.

"They finally found me a few days later on a Muggle avenue... I knew I had no more time to run, but that so long as I was on a busy street, I

would remain safe. They would not dare attack in front of so many witnesses..."

His gaze fell from the mirror, his fingers running blindly across the highly wrought iron of it's frame.

"The nearest person to convince had been a destitute in rags." He ground out. "Once they had drunk the potion, I disappeared."

A distinct tightening of her chest froze her. He had not... He could not...

"I can only assume what happened next, since my body was found."

Her arms were shaking. Another death... Another innocent that had been killed by one who had deserved a fate worse than death... Another innocent who's loss would forever go unnoticed..

"You sacrificed an innocent person to save your own skin..." She whispered haltingly.

His fists tightened around the edge of the mirror, his gaze avoiding his own reflection. "I know. But I did what was necessary. My life was of more value than the street urchins."

The horror within her chest was close to exploding. "A-a child? You killed a child..."

"Children are so oft gullible. You of all people, having been one yourself, should know this. They are so much more trusting..."

"Who are you to make that choice?" She cried chokingly.

"The urchin did not know the things about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named that I did."

"And I suppose you expect me to believe that you were going to come forward with that information?"

His deadened expression deepened. "If self preservation demanded it I would have."

She shook her head disbelievingly, her fingers wrapping around the cushions she sat upon. "You're a monster..."

He turned on her, "I was, but unlike you the things I grew to do were never my choice. Don't delude yourself into thinking otherwise."

"You always have a choice!"

"No Nymphadora. Purebloods do not always have a choice. My mother and father taught me that..."

"You can't blame them for your choices Regulus..."

"Then who should I blame? Unlike you I was taught to hate."

She shook, choking back a sob. "Sirius was able to make his own..."

He laughed bitterly. "Sirius was always the strong one, the rebellious one. But never for a second did he try to help me Nymphadora. Never delude yourself into thinking I could have chosen the path he did."

He spun away, facing the wall. "The second I donned the Slytherin crest he lumped me in with the rest of our cursed family. They were all I had." He finished hollowly.

"You should be in Azkaban."

"You're probably right, but that is not the reality."

"You're a self confessed murderer." She replied. "It should be."

"Still living in the sheltered world of your childhood are we? You never could accept the cold realities of the world, not with your mummy and daddy sheltering you as they were, encouraging your idealistic fantasies..."

"Better than Pureblooded homicidal mania."

His head fell. "Yes... It was homicidal wasn't it. As was I..."

"As a Muggle you'd be amazed at the high paying jobs that one can achieve if only they possess the proper persuasion." His long fingers caressed the worn wood of his wand, its blunt end emerging from the pocket of his overcoat.

Her narrowed eyes followed his path to the end of the study. "You threatened them..."

"No, I confounded them." He responded irritably. "By the time I was done I had them believing I had the proper qualifications, the proper schooling, the best references..." He returned to the mirror, studying his reflection. "I was doing them a favor really. I am much better at my job than any of those Muggle nutters that profess to be my colleagues. Scalpels indeed..."

"Scalpels?" She repeated dully, the word's reference ringing true.

He nodded curtly. "Yes Nymphadora, I am a healer, or a doctor so to speak."

"Being a healer requires years of study Regulus!" She practically screamed. "You mean to tell me you confounded actual doctors into believing you were..."

"One of them, yes Nymphadora. That's exactly what I did."

"How can you just fall into that?" Her voice quivered with suppressed rage, her brain frantically turning over the new information, attempting to process it unsuccessfully.

"Sort of. Obviously memory charms were often used, particularly in my early years. But I practiced it until I got it right."

"You used human beings as guinea pigs..." The shrillness to her voice had reached a crescendo.

He shrugged. "It was no worse than the treatment they had been getting from my so-called colleagues."

"But guinea pigs? You could have killed someone Regulus!"

"I never did Nymphadora. Instead I saved them, many of them..." He spoke with conviction, turning to her, his face as calm as ever despite the clear belief in his eyes.

Until then, his eyes had retained the look of the dead. Until right then, Tonks would have believed that his soul was as dead as his body had been rumored to be.

Until then she had not realized what his hasty risks had meant.

"Many of them would have died had it not been for my magic Nymphadora, the magic they lack, the magic the Ministry selfishly keeps to themselves..."

She swallowed hard, grasping for the words. "That's how you helped Emily and Kenneth..."

He nodded, his steely gaze boring into her own. "Yes. The girl was in bad shape, a collapsed lung. It had been punctured by a broken rib. I can only assume she sustained it from the impact of the crash."

The severity of the situation fell upon her just then.

Emily Bothan could have died, and it had taken a reformed Death Eater to save her.

And he had.

Suddenly Regulus Black's resemblance to Sirius ran more than skin deep, for suddenly she was able to see something good in his soul.

As if reading her thoughts he spoke. "Speaking of my estranged world, how is that dear brother of mine? Back in Azkaban I suppose?" He gestured to a copy of the paper that lay on the small stand beneath the mirror. "I saw his picture in the paper a few years back."

She tore her eyes from him for the first time since awakening. There was no longer a reason to eye him suspiciously.

"He's dead Regulus."

Unable to see him, the clearly strained voice told her enough. "How?" He whispered falteringly.

It was a single word.

Just one.

"Bellatrix."

She noticeably jerked as his fists pounded down, grinding into the wooden stand he had turned back to. "I believe it's time I returned." He whispered dangerously, ignorant or uncaring of how his bloodied knuckles stained the expensive wood. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have been gone for years, but I doubt his true aims have changed."

Was he forgetting his own situation...

"Regulus, you're a known Death Eater. The second the Ministry finds out you're alive they'll imprison you without trial."

The silence was scarcely penetrable by his next words. "I'll be needing to speak to the Minister of Magic in a closed location then. I will not go to prison." His voice shook, "I cannot. Not until the truest monster is gone..."

"I'll do you one better. "Albus Dumbledore."

Regulus Black nodded resolutely. "Good. It's about time I saw how truly great that man supposedly is."

"The unwritten law of triage is knowing when nothing else can be done, and actually accepting that."

A.K. Lovell

Chapter 24 The Black Pool

Dublin, Ireland. Population in excess of 450,000 Muggles, 1,240 witches and wizards, and 451,240 innocents.

Since mediaeval times the locale had served as the capital of the free standing Republic. The Black Pool, or so the Anglicism had stated. Now the expanse of land it rested upon stood as one of the most populated pockets of isolation upon the earth.

An island.

5.8 million Muggles in the Republic of Ireland alone, another 1.7 million in Northern Ireland, and upon the entire United Kingdom land mass, 4,694 beings of magical descent.

The island contained the largest percentage of magical beings per capita of any place on earth.

It could soon contain the lowest.

At the mouth of the River Liffey, the bustling Black Pool of commerce lay in wait, as did a woman clad in the disgusting guise of Muggle apparel.

The rain had let up considerably in comparison to the early morning pelting, yet the harsh drizzle did nothing to mar the once striking beauty as she stood alone upon the Lucan bridge, dark hair flowing in the wind like a canvas born of the Renaissance.

In truth, had one possessing the skill sat to immortalize her countenance, it would have borne striking similarity to a painting that had once hung centuries earlier upon the inlaid walls of Sarsfield castle.

The only dissimilarity between the canvases lay in the minute detail of the subjects' hands, her pale, elegant fingers gently uncorking a clear vial, tilting it's contents over the ancient brick viaduct until they churned upon the wind disturbed water below.

As the woman disappeared, seemingly without a trace to the eyes of Muggle passersby, the beginnings of the curse began filtering into the water system of downtown Dublin.

The Black Pool would soon reawaken a Black Plague.

Love.

Because of it cities have been erected, and fallen. Homes have been made, and broken. Mere mortals have been resurrected, and forgotten.

It holds the capability of silencing the strong, immortalizing the weak, dashing the dearest of dreams and destroying the darkest of fears. It's sheer power is unfathomable, and it is due to this overwhelming emotion that the human spirit is capable of being broken.

For one raven haired man, the pressure born of hate and preserved by his love was upon him as it had never before been. The blank, deadened eyes of Seamus Finnigan haunting him even as he breathed in the reassuring presence of the young girl clutched in his arms, his face turned from the world to bury against her skin, his only respite from the cruel reality that was his hell, and life.

It has been said that it is only strength of character that separates the weak from the strong, for their ability to cast feeling, attachment, and love aside... Therein rests their unfaltering ability to do what must be done, in the darkest of times.

Wordlessly the girl had taken him by the hand, silently leading him through the thick coppices and bramble, disregarding the way the coarse briars tore her skin, snaring her clothing. Her silhouette seemed incapable of feeling, and the young man's envy of her skill

was thickening, for each thorny prick dragging across his skin sung the guilt he felt, crying for his intervention in what they had left behind in Hogsmeade with the tug of a portkey.

The man felt guilty of abandonment, and murder. Though in his heart, he knew which was worse.

The young man had been forced to leave his friends in the rapidly growing battle ground, for Voldemort's evil had reared again, and again he had come out upon the lesser side, trapped as he was in the darkened forest, incapable of helping anyone.

How was this pathetic wizard supposed to defeat the darkest of them?

It has also been said that strength of character is best not determined by one's indifference, by their ability to distance themselves from the situation at hand, but by their ability to feel the pleas of the weak as if they were their own burdens. For it is in these individuals that the rarest of souls are found, for the few who walk upon the earth with burdened and broken souls are often the most capable of loving, and saving the rest of us.

His footsteps were sinking into the damp earth, following in the girl's tracks as they pushed their way through the thickets, stumbling into a small moonlit clearing, a murky pool of water collecting near its edge.

It was perhaps the saddest, and cruelest of ironies, that the two brave souls standing torn and battered, bathed in the blue hues of moonlight filtering between the night sky's mottled clouds, were the perfect exemplifications of both sides of the spectrum.

Both had been through hell itself, and survived, yet only one had come out fully capable of loving, despite the world crashing around him.

The other was still learning, and it would perhaps be the breaking of the other besides her that would finally teach her how to again, care without restraint.

October 31st, Halloween, 1996.

It would forever stand as the day of infamy, as the night when Aurors had fallen upon the town in striking force, scattering Death Eaters to the far flung corners of the Earth, to wherever their alcoves of safety lay, leaving the scarcely varnished village under the jurisdiction of the Ministry.

There was much to sort out.

It had taken so long for them to reach it's inhabitants, for Hogsmeade had not been the only town to fall under attack this day. And being the only all wizarding village in England, the Aurors had come to it's aid last, for Muggle areas had few defenses, while the citizens of Hogsmeade had at least been armed.

Unlike the innocent Muggles who had been found, lifelessly sprawled upon city streets, magical beings had held the power to fight back.

And fight they had. As the Aurors had spilled forth from the forest the villagers had risen up, only for those drabbed in the visage of hell to disappear as quickly as they had come.

No others had been able to conquer the anti-apparation wards that had been erected, but the Death Eaters had found a way.

Throughout the UK, from Dundee to Belfast, from Diagon Alley to Dublin's Aingingein Marketplace, from the Orkney islands above Scotland to the towns bordering the English Channel, magical recesses of homes and beings, small pockets of isolated homes and wizards, and places of commerce had been taken over.

They had all been targeted, held captive until night had fallen, and each surviving being of magical descent present professed to have felt the same effect. A cold, worse than death quickening of the blood that had seeped into their very souls, raising the shackles of animals and hairs of humans, eliciting the screeches of owls and cries of children had fallen just at dusk, and for those present the time falling

immediately after, as towns had risen up in defense, fighting back as the Death Eaters fled and Aurors arrived, it would be remembered as the time of silence.

Something had happened that day, for the Death Eaters had swarmed into the villages and private homes, avoiding only the Muggle populaces, and killing only those Muggles who strayed in their way, and the few wizards and witches who had persistently fought back before the arrival of the Aurors.

Thirty four dead, one hundred and sixty injured, and that was in England alone.

Most had been Muggles that had strayed in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Seamus Finnigan had been amongst the fallen, the only innocent to have died in Hogsmeade, killed by the killing curse erupting from the Imperioused wand of Ginerva Molly Weasley.

Ginny Weasley now lay, near catatonic with the grief of her actions, with the knowledge of her unwillingly dealt sins, in the hospital wing of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

She had been able to fight strongly enough to save her brother from the killing curse she had fired upon him, but she had not been strong enough to save her boyfriend.

It was a thought that would haunt her for the rest of her life, and while she remained silently mute under the care of Pomfrey, Dean Thomas sat upon the cold corridors of the hospital wing's hall.

The noise of the hall was deafening, reverberating with the frenzied footfalls and echoes of frantic parents unable to locate their children. Very few had taken credence to Dumbledore's assurances that there were only three children within the hospital wing, two of whom Dean treasured above life itself.

He hardly felt the pain as another large father trampled upon his foot, and he pulled his legs closer to his chest, wishing to sink into the wall for all he was worth.

Seamus was gone...

Ginny was no longer speaking...

Kalliandra, Harry, and Hermione were missing...

And no one was letting on what had happened to Ron...

Silently tears of shame poured from his eyes, the newly appointed Gryffindor beater finally succumbing to the overpowering emotions.

It was then that the sandy haired mother of Seamus stumbled into the hall, nearly knocking Luna Lovegood to the floor, her deadened eyes remarkably similar to how Ginny's had been when he had found her, crumbled and shaking besides Professor Tres' unconscious form in the kitchen of Madam Puddifoots.

Pressing his forehead to his bent up knees, shame dealt it's final blow, for he now knew the truth.

He was going to hell, if this was not already it.

Somewhere, deep in the forest, Harry calmly observed the sky. The autumn leaves struck a stark contrast to the night's dark backdrop, and deep gray clouds blotted out all semblance of starlight, save for the few persistent pinpoints and the sliver of moonlight fighting their way through the mottled mess.

It was exquisite.

Though no amount of beauty, nor staring, could drive the disturbing thoughts from his mind for long, and with a resigned sigh he knelt before the small pond, his knees sinking into the damp earth besides Kaylens.

"Are you okay?"

He heard her words, yet failed to respond. Instead his eyes remained glued to the wavering personage upon the water's surface. Staring back at him were the accusatory jade eyes of one whose loved ones were either gone, or in peril. The man in the reflection was one he did not recognize, for it was a man who had killed without regret, and who would do it again.

The inky black image was revealing how he had become all he had once abhorred, and it was a thought for which he was ill prepared.

Never looking up, he finally spoke.

"No."

His cupped hands plunged into the spring, scattering the damnable reflection from its surface, rippling the weeds extending near the other embankment.

A long time passed, the sound of light splashing besides him mingling with sounds of the night, as they both rubbed the blood from their hands in the icy water.

Upon its inky surface his reddened blood swirled, pooling from his reopening wounds. Though the pain was something that could not reach him, numbed as his senses were from the hypothermic waters.

It was the feeling of her hands carefully wrapping around his own, that finally pulled him from his near cataleptic state. His eyes rose from the water he had hoped to drown within, falling to rest upon her calm countenance.

Her crystalline eyes held his, concern flickering in the dull moonlight.

"We need to do something about this." She whispered, her breath crystallizing upon the cooling air.

There was no doubting what she meant, for his hands were pained at her mere touch, intertwined as they were with her cold ones, beneath the impenetrable spring's surface. He reveled in that silence, grimacing only as she forcibly withdrew his hands from the mercifully numbing waters. The harsh sting of the cool night air sent pinpricks of pain shooting through his wounds, burning his arms in a way contradictory to the evening's breeze.

The barest trace of disquiet lingered upon her concerted face, for she was studying the gashes along his calloused hands, the ones he had received as he fought to cut the bonds binding them within Rosmereta's small pub.

That small pub now held some of the most important people in his life, and he had never felt farther from it.

The sharp sound of cloth ripping catapulted him from the ill fated road his thoughts were traveling upon, and where his hands had just been, enclosed in her own, now lay a strip of shredded cloth. She had torn a shred of cloth, from his cloak, and was wrapping it tightly around his palm, winding it up and over his wrist where the deepest of wounds stretched.

Cringing he did not impede her concentrated progress, though his voice betrayed his skepticism. "Do you know what your doing?"

Sparing not a word, the last strip was tugged tightly in place. With a satisfied sigh she tilted her head to the side, a curious expression befalling her. "Well..." She replied faintly, her cold thumb tracing along his skin around the makeshift bandaging. "You'd better hope so."

He scowled at her, flexing his wrists testingly. The movements were stiff, but would suffice.

"Not bad..." He muttered, glancing at his torn sleeve. "Just had to destroy my cloak didn't you?"

"Hmph."

She offered no further reply, lazily trailing her hands within the cool waters once again, her eyes falling shut.

Unconsciously his eyes were drawn to her, following her hands effortless progress upon the glistening water, and for the first time he noticed the ambling play of magic before him, for her fingers were playing lithely across the water's dark surface, a dull glow radiating at the threshold where the static surface finally broke, allowing her fingers entry, rose up from its depths.

He regarded the interplay, a slow curiosity rising as flecks of magic trailed beneath her hands, coloring the light swellings she was creating. Ripples, swelling out in successive rings, bore the sparkling only a scant ways before the light tumbling within the waters faded away.

And it was not for the first time, nor for the last, that he again realized how little he still knew about the magical world.

He leaned towards her, curiosity crossing his features, for how could the girl who could not incant perform the display before him? His question rolled from his lips quietly, and though her face remained averted from his, her reflection upon the rippling water betrayed her faint smile.

"What are you doing?" Was what he had whispered, steadying himself with one hand upon the dew stained grass.

Her hair fell loose from behind her shoulder, tumbling to veil her face. "You know..." She replied softly, "I'm not entirely sure."

"Experimental magic? And you call me reckless?"

"Well..." She whispered, her reflection smiling, "Insane is probably a better term."

"A pity then." He quipped lowly, looking across the water, its very surface vibrating with life. "For we're trapped in the woods without a semblance of sanity between us."

She murmured in agreement, withdrawing her fingers from the water, flicking the clear droplets from them in his direction.

His grunt of protest was ignored, for her watchful eyes had flickered out across the rippling water, gazing searchingly into the shadowy forest. And for the thousandth time since their first meeting, he wondered if she could see things he could not.

As if in response to his thoughts, a light furrow creased her brow, barely discernable as the clouds moved to obscure the cool moonlight, throwing shadows across her countenance. And as a gentle breeze sent the reeds protruding from the embankment swaying, her demeanor stiffened, her shoulders relaxing only with the cessation of the plants' hypnotic motions.

"Jittery?"

His question was met not with the expected disdain, but with something else.

"Yes." She whispered darkly.

Her cold intonations were disturbing, and his eyes joined hers in sweeping the tree line for any sign of malevolence. Yet just as before, when he had checked upon their arrival, there was none to be found.

A thought occurred to him, and finally after the wind had risen in intensity, sending the reed tips tilting so as to dip into the pond's surface, he spoke it aloud.

"Are you familiar with port keys?"

She turned a questioning expression to him, her hair scattering like a feathery halo about her face in the blustery breeze. Such was the disturbance of her thick mane that he could not tell whether she nodded yes or no until it had died down.

Only then did it occur to him that the object of their very displacement could also be the object of their rescue. His hands scrambled in the deep folds of his thick cloak for the Kunnskap, and finally he dumped

it upon the cold earthy mud, taking care to never allow it's dulled golden chain to touch his flesh.

Kaylens eyes filled with understanding, "It's how we got here."

He nodded, reaching for her hand with his bandaged one. Though when his fell atop hers, she did not take it.

His eyes caught hers, "Trust me." He whispered.

Steadily the hesitation within her eyes vanished, and slowly she turned her hand around, allowing his fingers to interlace with hers. Squeezing her hand as gently as his limited mobility allowed, he guided her to the Kunnskap with him.

"Take it with me."

His eyes having never left hers, he saw that she understood his meaning, for the Kunnskap had been their portkey there, and had it been somehow re-activated, they could take it back to Hogsmeade together with a simple touch of their fingers to its surface.

He absolved to never leave her alone, not anywhere, not ever again.

With baited breath they touched the chain.

Nothing.

Sharing a half disappointed, half relieved smile, they exhaled the breaths they had both been holding.

As he re-gathered the chain in his hands, she was the first to break the impenetrable silence.

"Your portkey doesn't seem to be working."

He cast her an irritable glance, examining the runes carved into the pensieve's vial. Unsurprisingly, not one depiction cast a shred of light onto the situation at hand. Maybe, just maybe, he would take

Hermione up on her offer to teach him ancient runes when they returned.

"It must be conditional," He finally decided. "It's the only solution."

At this Kaylens' brow creased critically, and he explained further.

"You know how most port keys are touch sensitive, taking people back and forth between two places?"

Her head bobbed lightly, another cold gust sending her hair awry. This time she did not bother fighting with it, and let it lie as it fell.

He fought back a small smile as her nose wrinkled, her long strands clearly tickling it. "Well..." He continued, "A conditional port key only activates under certain circumstances. You can be touching it, but it won't take you anywhere because its 'condition' is not met." He glanced down at the vial, slipping it into his cloak once again. "Dumbledore made this for me, so I'm guessing it activates when the wearer is in mortal peri..."

Mortal peril...

He trailed off, not realizing the expression that had befallen his face until Kaylens concerned words drew him back to the present, away from the snarling teeth and growls of Hogsmeade's back alley.

He had not known until that day, until he had felt the telling tug behind his navel, that the Kunnskap doubled in purpose, and his oversight of Dumbledore's secretive method of ensuring his own protection could have very well cost Kaylens her life.

She was saying his name, yet he barely heard. For how could his life, his very existence, be worth the endangerment to others that it brought with it?

His mouth went dry, and a cold, unnerving feeling spread through him. Forcing his eyes to raise to hers, he saw the confusion swirling within them.

"Kaylens...I didn't...." He was suddenly avoiding her eyes, the shame of his oversight darkening his features. "I swear I didn't know..."

The inexplicable urge to drown himself within the unfeeling pond took precedence, but the urge was driven from his mind by her hand reaching for his.

He found himself staring at the back of her smooth hand lying atop his, and it was some time before his eyes darted to behold her.

She was smiling. In fact, she seemed to be laughing.

"It's okay," She whispered, voice tinged with amusement. "I know you weren't trying to leave me to fend off the wolves myself."

And despite her tone, he felt himself pale.

"But if I had... If it hadn't snapped and you had not been holding on I wou..."

She was positively clamping upon her lower lip, "Now who's the one stuttering?" She intoned, shaking with light laughter.

He merely stared, feeling her fingers slipping between his own, willingly interlocking, yet he was not daring enough to look.

"Kaylens..." He murmured, eyes closing in pain. "This has been a disaster."

"It could have been worse." She whispered, the irony of her words mocking the disaster they had lived through.

And then it happened. Everything he had been fighting back suddenly came swimming frighteningly close to the surface, and the brief thought of whether or not she truly meant it flashed through his mind.

"It could have been worse."

Hogsmeade had been taken, Dean could be dying, Hermione was injured, and the others like innocent Ginny Weasley, the sister he grew to have, were under the Imperious.

And then there was Seamus...

She knew about all of this, yet could sit there and say that.

Harry's icy green eyes flew open, narrowing onto her. "How...how can you possibly say that?"

Unapologetically she held his gaze, her expression falling. "Because it's the truth."

He swallowed, every fiber of his being disagreeing with each of her uttered syllables.

"Seamus is dead," He finally whispered, regaining control. "We abandoned the others. We failed them. Or did you forget tha..."

"No we didn't."

He stared, unable to reconcile the rising grief and guilt that had swept upon him as suddenly as a tidal wave, with her professions.

"We failed."

She shook her head slowly, jaw setting determinedly in acknowledgement of his repetition.

"No Potter," She countered. "Luna and Weasley needed a distraction, and that's exactly what we gave them. All we can do now is hope they took advantage of it. If we had not done that then we would have failed them."

Lifeless blue eyes...

"What if it wasn't enough?"

Her eyes flickered searchingly across his face, her brow creasing concernedly. "Do you really have that little faith in them?"

Her voice was as serious as he had ever heard it, and as gentle, yet the bitterness could not be kept from his voice as he pulled his hand from hers.

"I don't know anymore." He whispered gruffly, not knowing which was worse: The hurt expression upon her face, or the knowledge that he actually believed his words, for he did not have faith in his friends.

At least not when it came to their avoidance of bodily harm. The Department of Mysteries had proven that much, for they had fought bravely, yet their ineptness... Both had fallen almost immediately, first Ron, and then Hermione.

And Kaylens... Just for being near him, just for helping him, just as Ron and Hermione always had, she had nearly been killed.

"I'm of no good to anyone." He realized somberly, vocalizing his thoughts. "Not to anyone. Not to Ron, not to Hermione, not to Seamus, not to..."

"What?"

Failing to catch this his insensible vocalizations of self-loathing continued, unheard to his own ears, yet perfectly clear to the girl besides him.

"How dare you."

This time he heard her, her voice vibrating dangerously, his eyes instantly flying to her furious expression.

Deep within her eyes something frightening was stirring.

"How dare you say that," She breathed quietly, her left hand shaking ever so slightly.

This shaking was her only sign of emotion, for her deadened tone was perhaps colder than her adopted expression.

"In case you didn't notice Potter, you are worth something," She whispered in continuation. "Because if it wasn't for you your friends would have never made it out of Hogsmeade, and not only that..."

She stood abruptly, brushing her hands on her jeans furiously, glowering down with chilling intensity.

"If it wasn't for you I would be dead right now Potter. But perhaps I don't count." Her fiery eyes burned a searching trail across him. "Not to you at least."

Her last words were the coldest of all, and the absence of her hand, no longer within the confines of his own, struck him in a way he was ill equipped to explain.

He had willfully pulled his hand from hers in anger.

Scrambling to his feet he closed the distance between them, catching her around the arm before she could make it any further. She struggled, her icy glare fixated furiously upon him, freezing him to the core, yet it did not stop him from pulling her to him and holding on.

He did not let go, wrapping his arms tightly around her form, stroking her hair until she stopped struggling.

"I'm sorry..." He whispered constrictedly, "I swear to God I'm sorry..."

She uttered not a sound, dropping her face against his shoulder, allowing his to bury within her hair. He only pulled her closer, warmth sinking through him as her hands burrowed beneath his robes, snaking around his midsection to hold him back.

"I never meant for you to think..." He swallowed, breathing deeply as he whispered into her hair. "To think I didn't care Kay..."

"Damn't Potter..." She interrupted harshly, her voice barely heard, muffled as it was against his robes. "Is there anything you don't blame yourself for?"

His throat vibrated oddly. "Not really," He ground out, a hand raising to tangle within her tresses. "Though with good reason..."

Her form stiffened, his forehead falling against hers as her face swiveled to regard him. Instinctively his arms encircled her shivering form ever tighter, prepared to do anything to prevent her from leaving.

Her glistening eyes turned up, both anger and assurance swimming contradictorily within them. "Potter..." She whispered, "No good reason exists here. You did all you could."

"Well..." He murmured gratingly, "It's a matter of opinion..."

A soft murmur of disapproval came from behind her closed lips, the changes upon her once impassive face startling. Unconsciously his eyes fell shut, his hands moving across her back comfortingly. Slowly he breathed her in, clutching her by her sweater, twisting it in the process as an exasperated sigh escaped her lips.

Against his skin he felt her eyelashes flickering shut, her warming palms sliding out from beneath his cloak, "Potter..." She whispered, rising her hands till they lay flat against his chest. "Sometimes I really hate you."

Nodding against her skin, he inhaled deeply, their unresolved conflicts fading from his mind. "You're in luck..." He replied, whispering despite their solitude. "Because the feeling's mutual."

"I'm sure..." She murmured back, face upturning as a blustery autumn wind sent her long tresses scattering haphazardly between them. His arms pulled her in closer, the loose sides of his robe billowing out and enveloping them both.

For the longest time they stood there, him shielding her from the darkness' icy claws, her shielding him from regression into the darkness of all he had been partly responsible for. And for the

thousandth time since their paths had first crossed, he found himself listening to her admonishments.

Predominant amongst them was his newly bestowed title, a strained smile crossing his face at the thought.

"King of Idiocy..." He murmured, a solitary hand sliding from where he cupped the back of her head, falling to rest along her cheek. "I can't believe you called me that."

The delicate fingers lingering upon his chest curled, capturing the folds of his beer stained robes. "From my point of view it's fitting."

A sad chuckle caught in his throat. "So I've been told."

"Mmmm..." She murmured back. "And I'm sure it has sunk in as well as that froth you're covered in."

He shook his head, his nose tousling her hair further. "Just remember..." He growled quietly, "I owe you."

"Do you?" She asked, inclining her head to look questioningly upon him. "And I thought it was I who owed you."

Despite his lack of joy, he found himself smiling. "You do, I just owe you a drink, and I don't mean the kind in a glass."

Her eyes shone with understanding, "You mean the kind overturned upon my head."

"Just wait..." He whispered, his lips falling upon her exposed earlobe. "You'll sit down in the Great Hall, and when you least suspect it..."

"Does it count that you deserved it?"

His throat vibrated lowly. "And you don't?"

"Point taken."

"You know..." He mused aloud, "You're awfully agreeable tonight."

"Well I don't fancy being strangled by you," She replied truthfully, eyeing him with amusement. "Alone, at night, in the Forbidden Forest... It'd be quite easy for you to get rid of me."

His brow furrowed at her words, a shrewd expression befalling him as he pulled away to regard her. "We're in the Forbidden Forest?"

God he hoped he had misheard.

The doors of the entrance hall needed naught to be thrown open, for in the havoc of parents coming and going, claiming their children before fleeing, the looming entryway remained passable to all.

Regulus Black strode through it, robes billowing ominously in his wake, looking for all the world as if hell itself could not deter him from his mission.

Only those who looked him in the eye would see the uncertainty that lay beneath the surface.

It was upon the main staircase that Dumbledore intercepted them, Tonks ushering Emily and a fully recovered Kenneth in front of her, due to their slightly drugged state.

Muggle repellant charms be damned, she had force them through the wards, for here they would be safe.

The door to Dumbledore's office slammed shut on an indignant knocker, Regulus wasting not a moment.

"He's attacked everywhere has he not?"

Dumbledore crossed the room, quickly climbing a small ladder to retrieve a small paperback, leather-bound text. "Of course."

Neither of the two men appeared uneasy with the other's presence. The unflappable elder appearing entirely unsurprised by the younger's sudden return to the living.

"Then his plan remains the same as before."

"Indeed..." Dumbledore replied calmly, descending his perch. "It's a shame the Ministry did not listen to the warnings."

Tonks cast an askance glance the Headmaster's way, steadying Emily's swaying form with a hand. "You knew this was coming?"

"I had my suspicions," Replied the Headmaster, squatting in front of young Emily, extending the text to her. The auburn haired child took it without a thought.

"My child..." Dumbledore requested kindly, "Would you do an old man the favor of reading a bit to him?"

Emily's head bobbed gently, opening the leather bound book with robotic motions, and as she began to read, the clouded look disappeared from her and Kenneth's eyes, as did their drugged states.

Ignoring Regulus' annoyed growl, Dumbledore responded to Tonks questioning look. "The only way to allow Muggles to feel at ease within our grounds, short of removing the wards, is to read from this book."

Tonks merely nodded, while Kenneth blinked confusedly. Emily, however, had already spied a squishy looking arm chair and wasted no time in making a bee line for it.

"If you don't mind, there is the small matter of a Dark Lord to attend." The sneer Regulus used paled in comparison to his tone.

Dumbledore merely smiled and pointed Kenneth towards the same chair, where the President promptly passed out, his small daughter in his lap. It was only then that Dumbledore's smiling exterior faltered, something far more serious flashing behind his half-moon spectacles.

Tonks remained silent, knowing full well she would better serve everyone by listening, for she was in the dark about what was transpiring. She, an Auror, was out of her realm with the discovery of the multiple attacks throughout the U.K., while Regulus merely grimaced, as if having long expected such an unpleasantry.

The last remaining heir of the Black family gestured to the sleeping family. "He's come after the family before?"

Both Tonks and Dumbledore nodded, while Regulus paced.

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may be a lot of things, but impulsive isn't one of them," Regulus said seriously. "If he's attacked them it's not coincidence, it's targeting. And I'm willing to bet it has something to do with his plan of eradication."

Her heart fluttered uneasily, "Eradication?"

Regulus paused mid-stride, "Surely your education was not that bereft of grammar to provide suitable excuse for your failure to understand such a short syllable word as eradication?"

Her dark eyes narrowed in annoyance, her tongue held in check only by the discipline born of years under the supervision of Kingsley and Mad-Eye's loose wand.

Regulus' equally dark eyes left hers duly, his pacing resumed, "At a time He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named desired merely the eradication of Muggleborns alone. The cleansing of our world would have sufficed, for then he would be free to rule it."

Reaching the wall he did an abrupt about-face, continuing undeterred upon his straight path. "His views eventually changed and he came to desire the deaths of both Muggles and Muggleborns, and if his plans remain similar to the plot of before, the plot I failed to assist in properly, than today marks the beginning of the plague."

Tonks breathed deeply, "There hasn't been a plague of precedence here since..."

"The Great Plague of London in the seventeenth century."

All eyes, including the drowsy Emily's, turned to regard the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black. Though while Emily gently tugged at her dozing father's sleeve, mumbling about the picture man in awe, Regulus glared in annoyance.

"Salutations Grandfather," He greeted with considerable sarcasm. "As always I am fortunate to have never been forced to suffer your condemnable, condescending presence in life."

Phineas ignored the insult, choosing to correct Regulus by reminding him that he was his Great-Great-Grandfather, and as such demanded a greater degree of respect.

"That irritable stone doorknocker demands respect as well, but that does not mean we give it to him." Quipped Regulus, his long fingers creating a hollow melody along the shelving.

The Headmaster's eyes twinkled at the sound of Crusantheus' protestations from outside the door. "Your presence has charmed everyone within earshot Regulus, I can only hope to earn such praise by the end of our meeting as well. I'm beginning to feel left out."

Simultaneously all of the portraits, Tonks, the doorknocker, Fawkes, and a merman sculpture snorted.

Regulus and Phineas surveyed the room with identically critical expressions, glowering at those uncouth enough to snort in their civilized presences.

"I've wasted too many years abroad to idly stand around and be chortled at. There is again, the matter of a Dark Lord to attend to."

Tonks sobered immediately, her eyes fixating upon the child and man under her protection, the ones Regulus himself was responsible for saving when she had failed.

Her mouth formed the words, her emotionless clip telling of her seriousness.

"Tell me more of this plague, Regulus."

And that he did, revealing the true reason for his defection from the ranks of the Death Eaters.

"Do you remember the coordinated attacks in my youth Headmaster?"

"The ones just before your disappearance?"

Black nodded somberly, "Yes, only on a smaller scale than the ones of today I shall imagine. On that day I was to deliver a vial into the River Thames, spreading the plague throughout the entirety of Muggle London." The man's voice betrayed not a hint of emotion as he confessed his deeds, his hands clasped neatly behind his back.

"It was only natural," He continued, "For He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to coordinate attacks upon wizarding villages, entrapping the wizarding folk within. The orders were to not kill nor harm the inhabitants unless absolutely necessary, and while the magical folk were trapped he unleashed a spell, a counter curse if you will, one that would grant all those within the wards at the time of its casting immunity from the plague."

"Wait...wasn't there a risk of the counter curse failing?" Another portrait, one by the name of Dilys Derwent, inquired.

Her cousin's dark glare was answer enough.

"So why risk wiping out the wizarding population of Britain, his home, when there were other places where he may have tested it?" Tonks asked, directing her cousin's dark gaze from the defenseless portrait to herself.

Regulus thin lips went taunt, "Nymphadora, you again underestimate him, assuming he places value in abstract concepts such as love and home." His eyes narrowed considerably, "He does not, and what

better place to test an experimental vaccine if you will, then upon a populated island."

Dilys Derwent's eyes widened, and Kenneth let out a jolting snore.

"If the counter curse proved ineffective than the only wizarding communities lost would be those of the U.K." Dumbledore said sadly, "A reasonable loss to one such as Tom, considering his strongest resistance has always been in Britain."

Regulus nodded somberly, "If it was ineffective, only a small portion of the world's wizarding population would be lost, yet millions of Muggles would be gone with them. And since it was on an island, isolated from the main continents, the chances of it spreading to the other continents would be very slim indeed."

Dilys shook her head, "Not with Muggle transportation. Now-a-days it could spread..."

"Quickly," Regulus supplied. "There were plans to prevent this as well, to shut down major Muggle transportation networks until the experiment had run it's course. However, what those plans were, I was not privy to. We were on a need to know basis."

Listening to the conversation Tonks stomach churned. The cold calculation that must have gone into an endeavor such as that... The realization that people, who harbored such little regard for human life, existed was chilling.

Her parents accounts of such dark times were what had driven her to join the ranks of the Aurors in the first place, even if she herself harbored no personal memory of those days.

She had been only seven upon the ides of June, when the towns had been held during the day lit hours for reasons never discovered.

Regulus Black was now revealing the undisclosed reasoning behind the 24 deaths that had occurred that day. For his job had been to unleash the Plague that night, once the wizarding communities had been safely and effectively immunized.

The Plague had never been unleashed, for Regulus Black, the trustworthy son of a noble pureblooded family, had never shown. And now that same son was setting the vial, the same vial that he had kept for years in his possession, upon the Headmaster's desk.

"Whatever it does, it was rumored to make the Bubonic Plague seem like the flu."

It would be the deadliest plague to befall the planet, and according to Regulus, the same plague would have been unleashed under similar circumstances.

Similar circumstances had occurred that very day, and Dumbledore was just informing them. Fawkes disappeared in a fiery puff of smoke, sent to summon Severus and the best of healers to began examining the deadly contents of the vial.

With an ashen face Tonks took it all in, only one thought resonating within her head.

God help us.

"Kaylens?" He questioned hesitantly, waiting for some response. Yet she only regarded him quizzically, nodding slowly in response to his question.

They were in the Forbidden Forest, and her with her foolish naivety had not thought once to mention it before now.

They were in the Forbidden Forest...

How in the hell could she have know that?

His expression instinctively hardened, as did his hands upon her, for temporary isolation within a woodland was one thing, but isolation within the Forbidden Forest was an entirely different matter.

Eyes sweeping the forest's menacing tree line defensively, he remained unresponsive to her questioning eyes. His only reaction was the slight loosening of his arms around her form as he silently prayed their safety would hold out.

Unsatisfied, yet helpless to improve matters, his arms fell to her waist, hands stiffening along her spine. "Kaylens..." He whispered lowly, "Why did you not think to mention this earlier?"

Her chest rose against his, her slow breath crystallizing on the cooling air.

"What good would it have done?" She whispered back. "It wasn't worth mentioning."

Swallowing hard he regarded her through narrowing slits. "Perhaps I'm wrong," He said lowly, "But when something concerns our safety I'd consider it worth mentioning."

"If I had told you before, what would you have done?" She whispered dryly. "We're in too deep to risk travel, especially in the darkness."

"I like the dark."

"So do arachnids."

His eyes narrowed further, "How could you possibly know about them?"

Lifting her chin defiantly she met his gaze, "Hagrid."

He nodded, voice heavily laced with sarcasm, "And I'm sure he's in the practice of telling all his students about Aragog."

Her expression defied his test, for her eyes told him she knew exactly of what he spoke as she shook her head. "No, but I was like him Potter. I can't do magic, just like he was forbidden to after his expulsion, so we had something in common..."

Grinding his teeth to prevent an interjection he listened warily.

"The only thing that saved him was being able to work with the creatures of this forest Potter, did you know that?"

He shook his head disbelievingly, "You can't work around them without a wand, it's too dangerous. And unlike you he at least had his..."

"Umbrella?" She whispered shrewdly. "No. Not at first."

"And what does this have to do with you not telling me where we were before now?"

"Everything, because when I first came here Hagrid showed me how the forest was divided into quadrants of each magical species' territory."

He inclined an eyebrow questioningly, encouraging her to continue.

"This quadrant is rather near their nest."

His blood grew cold in memory of his last experience, hands tightening along her back further. "You still should have told me," He whispered.

She smiled sadly, "Since when did I have to inform you of everything within my head?"

"Since now."

She shrugged impassively, "I'm surprised you didn't know. It was your port key that took us here, so I assumed you had known where it had taken us."

Exasperatedly his eyes fell shut, chest rising as he inhaled deeply, "Did I just imagine telling you Dumbledore made it? Or did I not already relay that I had no clue that the vial was a port ke..."

"You told me that recently," She interjected. "We were here in silence for hours. How was I to intuitively know that you were unaware of our location before then?"

"You should have said something the second I told you I had nothing to do with the port key Kayle..."

"Considering that you were in mid-apology I'm going to disagree," She whispered, leveling her gaze to his. "It's not often that one sees the great Potter apologize about anything and I wasn't about to interrupt that."

His hands dropped at her words, for the conversation had turned in a strikingly different direction. She merely took a step back, regarding him from a safe distance with masked eyes.

"It's the truth Potter. It didn't even occur to me that you were clueless about where we were until a second ago. Before I was busy being concerned that you were actually capable of showing some semblance of human emotion...." Her eyes narrowed, tones drowned in sarcasm. "Asides from anger or suspicion that is."

With that she dropped down to the ground, becoming utterly fascinated by the swaying reeds as he was left with naught but her back to regard.

This was not how it was supposed to be. She was the one who's emotions were constantly masked. She was the inhuman one, not him.

By the time he was done telling her that, in not quite succinct sentences, he was reasonably sure that her expression would betray hostile intent towards him.

Though as he moved to stand besides her kneeling form, suddenly the escalation of their argument seemed worthless as he glimpsed her torn expression. Turning away from him, the back of her wrists began wiping at her eyes.

It was a long time before either again spoke, the only sound the howling of the wind between the forest's trees.

"Kaylens I..."

"No..." She whispered, "Don't bother. Just realize that some of us do not have the luxury to leave our feelings unmasked."

Only one word came to mind, and he spoke it, unable to articulate in any other way his question as to why she had until this very day refused to show any semblance of her true self to him.

"Why?"

Her head bowed low, the ends of her long tresses dangling loosely in the rippling water. Finally, a small stretch of eternity passing, she again spoke.

"If you had the choice between keeping people safe, or putting good people at risk, what would you do?"

Her words were chilling, and he found himself standing still, frozen in that moment, heart thudding louder than it ought. Never before had someone uttered the words, or given voice to the question that so oft haunted him.

Not in the way she just had.

She turned on the wet grass, her glossy orbs rising in a determined way, betraying all the pain she had until now kept so carefully hidden.

"How can you let yourself care for others, when it could destroy them?"

Dean felt empty as he numbly shoved past the Fat Lady's portrait. Whether the password had fallen from his lips or not was something he would never know, and something the Fat Lady would keep to herself.

"Neville."

He addressed his dorm mate in a monotone, unable to look the boy in the eye, even as Neville smiled sadly, hauling his trunk down the stairs.

It was well after midnight, the majority of the students already gone, taken away by their families. Those remaining till the next morning, or indefinitely, as Dean was planning, would already be in their dormitories.

Save for Neville, who's gram had just arrived to take him home.

Neville shook his head sadly, "It isn't right. I shouldn't leave like this."

Dean shrugged, walking past him up the flight. "Then don't."

The other boy paused in his tracks, turning and nearly losing his trunk in the process. "It's not that simple."

Dean sighed resignedly, "It is Neville. Just take a stand for once. Don't back down." Like I did...

Neville's face furrowed anxiously, "And what happens if she doesn't let me?"

"We are at war Mr. Thomas, and soon you will be forced to choose a side!"

A strong hand stretched out to rest against the cold stone wall of the tower, and Dean steadied himself from the onslaught of regretful memories.

"Dean what if she tries to make me?"

"Make your choice!"

His expression hardened, hand leaving the wall as he turned to regard his nervous looking dorm mate, whose neck was craned high to see where he stood higher up upon the stairs.

"Neville..." He said seriously, his deep voice echoing upon the empty walls of the tower. "No one can make you do anything. Not unless you are too weak to stand up for what you want," His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Or for what you think is right."

Swiftly he strode down, taking the stairs two at a time until he was again level with the nervous looking boy.

"No one can force you to do anything," Dean imparted, his dark eyes squaring off with Neville's. "Not McGonagall. Not Snape." His continued, his own internal anger growing. "Not even Voldemort himself."

Leaning in Dean let his dark stare drill into Neville's light one. "And especially not your Gran," He whispered fiercely. "No one can force you to do something you do not already want to do. So if you think staying here is the right thing, then you better do it, lest you regret it later on."

Neville Longbottom looked at him as if he had never before seen him, and gulped apprehensively, for in Dean's normally congenial eyes there was no pity.

"There's nothing worse than looking back and wishing you had done something differently." Dean imparted intensely, straightening as a tabby cat bounded down from the girl's dormitory. "And I would think that someone who could face down Death Eaters, defending himself the way you did back in Hogsmeade, would not be one for backing down."

With a last glance at the cat Dean trudged up the flight, hell bent on retrieving Ronald Weasley's things. How in the hell he was to get Ginny's was another matter entirely, but the only thing he really knew, or cared about at that moment, was the satisfactory sound of Neville's trunk dropping to become abandoned on the stairs.

Later, when Dean came out of the dormitory, he would be greeted with an empty common room, Neville's unrelenting shouts of being needed at Hogwarts filling the halls.

Inside Harry felt something breaking, for Kalliandra's words were hitting closer to home than she could ever realize, for what had haunted him had haunted her.

Deep in the forest, the impenetrable silence was again shattered by her cheerless voice.

"Once someone cares for you, and I mean truly cares Potter, no amount of resistance will be able to push them away." Her haunting words fell to the unfeeling ground, her face once again lowered. "Once you let someone in there really is no going back, and doing that..."

She paused, Harry's heart wrenching at the realizations befalling him.

"It's something I cannot do." She finally whispered, eyes again falling upon the dark waters.

In that moment, the wind stirring the grass around his feet, he realized how abysmally stupid he had been. Kalliandra's words had never rang truer. And though he felt as if he were missing some integral point, for how the words applied to her he knew not, he did know how they applied to him.

Ron and Hermione would never leave his side, not ever.

A long time ago they had said there had been a point where they could turn back, and they had not.

Harry Potter suddenly realized when that moment had been, for both of them.

"I think I can judge the wrong sort for myself thanks."

Ron's face had glowed with acceptance.

"It was my idea Professor. I went looking for the troll. I had read about them and thought I could handle it. If Harry and Ron had not come when they did, I'd probably be dead."

A sad smile tugged at his heart, for Hermione Granger, knowing them as nothing other than cruel taunting boys, had broken every moral she had that Halloween night.

And she had done it for them.

The point where he could protect his friends had long since passed. The time where they could have been kept safe was over, and if he truly wanted them to survive their best chance would be together, not apart.

He had been a fool to think otherwise.

Eyes blinking rapidly, he regarded the girl who had brought this to light, torn between whether to drown her or embrace her. Though all he could bring himself to do was quietly watch, paralyzed by the sheer thought of speaking when he was only just realizing how little he understood about her.

In that moment he was struck by the intense pain he had failed to before notice. Even the fleeting glimpses he had before stolen... None of what had filtered through when she had been caught unaware... None of it could compare. Not to the sorrow flitting through in every pained crease of her brow, in every shaky breath indrawn, and in every halting gesture.

The rather plain, disheveled girl before him, the one capable of holding so much in, was suddenly strikingly beautiful.

In a moment of indecision he crossed to her. Gone was the stumbling boy who had once been unable to articulate a coherent thought around saddened females. Now, in the face of necessity, drawn together by circumstance, he found that his concern suddenly lay with the only person he held the power to help.

Kaylens.

Laying a hand upon her shoulder, the realization that her cloak was gone struck him. Once he had removed it, accessing her chest in the alley, he had never re-fastened the clasp.

It had been left behind, and in the rapidly chilling air she had let slip not one complaint.

Despite the stiffening of her shoulders beneath his throbbing palm, he knelt down, one arm snaking its way around her quivering form. Goosebumps were rising across her neck where her tresses had been swept aside, her skin far too cool for his liking.

Lowering his mouth to her ear his breath traced along her skin, his chin falling to rest on her shoulder as he spoke.

"You're stubborn, missing your cloak, and did not think to say a word," He whispered, pulling her against him, trapping her arms against her chest with his own. "And....you look like hell, and I do not fancy having you not only irritable but sick."

"Like hell..." She muttered softly, her words vibrating with her chattering teeth. Casting his eyes to the water he could see her reflection, and distracted expression. "You should see yourself."

"I'll let you revel in that torture alone," He responded softly, the chilling breeze sweeping the clouds aside once again, revealing the sliver of moon residing there that All Hallows Eve.

Her light strands tickled his face, his eyes falling shut as he reveled in the strange sensation, only opening as he felt her turn to regard him.

Before she could speak his hand rose, silencing her.

"Thank you," He whispered, watching the anger fade from her eyes. Now only confusion, mingled with mild surprise, swirled within her fiery orbs. The crease of her brow was question enough, and he

shook his head, mumbling how it was hard to explain, for how could he impart the realizations her single sentence had brought.

Unable to do so, he tightened his arms around her, pulling her to her feet before releasing her. Shrugging out of his cloak he spread it before them upon the cold earth, earning a puzzled look from where she stood, her own arms now wrapped tightly around herself.

Her lips parted slightly, though her protestation fell silent, for a thick woolen blanket now lay where his cloak had been a moment before.

Pocketing his wand he nodded satisfactorily. "Transfiguration," He offered by way of explanation, wrapping it around her shoulders, his hands lingering there. "If we remain here, we'll be safe?"

Haltingly she nodded, a golden tress falling loose from behind her ear, swinging freely in the light breeze that cast it across her face, her nose crinkling ever so slightly as the tress tickled her nose.

His hand rising to brush it aside, he watched her eyes turn to the forest, studying it with a barely concealed longing.

"We're welcome here," She whispered softly, "For now at least."

And against every ingrained instinct, he trusted her unquestioningly.

"Then here we'll stay."

Sliding his hands down her arms, taking her hands in his, he led her away from the water and towards a large oak with a comfortable looking trunk.

Within minutes a soft, smoke-free fire burned before them, his back to the oak and her resting comfortably against his chest, his arms encircling her tightly as she pulled the woolen blanket to her chin, covering them both.

Beneath the woolen fabric, where no eyes save theirs could see, two hands intertwined around a golden chain, a small vial carefully clutched between their palms, just in case.

"Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you."
Jean-Paul Sartre

Chapter 25 Condemnation by Choice Part 1

Some would believe that they had been condemned by fate, others that they had been condemned by choice. In the long run, those who believe that freedom can only be found by the choices one makes with what they have been given, are closer than either extreme.

Those who had cared for the dead and dying during the Bubonic Plague, risking exposure so that others could be spared, made the best choice they could with the dire circumstances life had dealt them. And though more than three centuries had passed since anything of similar proportion had struck civilized society, history would soon repeat itself.

Bathed in the inky hues of darkness, upon the shores of the River Liffey, a man with a fishing pole smiled into the moonlit sky. The rain had long since let up, and he basked in the early dawn's fragrant scent, enjoying the spray of the river splashing against the shoreline.

He would soon be the first to succumb to the world's greatest plague.

He did not know this, not that early morning as he sat upon the dewy grass, eagerly anticipating the morning sunrise he had awoken so early to see. He could not foresee this anymore than he could foresee that his wife and three children would be the next to succumb, leaving their once vibrant home devoid of laughter, love, and life.

They would all be dead within seventy-two hours.

Neville... Dean...

Beneath a thick, dark veil of russet toned strands, two dark eyes fluttered blurrily. The visual centers of her brain were not ready to

receive the signals traveling across her optic nerve. The pain signals were still far too overwhelming.

Despite this the girl's eyes fluttered open, peering into her new hell.

A fuzzy, rectangular outline, the color of a finely aged manuscript's pages...it rested besides where she lay, her body feeling unnaturally whole upon the smooth satin sheets. Somehow she was left with the lurking sensation that everything should not be quite right...with what though...for certainly her skull was whole.

The girl's brilliant mind felt somehow...violated. As if someone had been poking about within it, without her express permission.

As if someone had been searching through her most cherished memoirs...

Again the names came to her, hitting her with the force of a heavily muscled serpentine tail.

Her pleasant delusions born of slumber were shattered, her lips parting with an indrawn gasp as the foreign, fuzzy room fell into focus, as did the woman resting within the high backed chair, legs elegantly crossed, a cruel, taunting expression stretched taunt across her lips. And like a predator stalking its prey, the woman's eyes were purposeful, triumphant, and locked upon her own.

Somewhere in her recovering mind the girl realized that the woman was intent on stealing her innermost secrets, and what better moment to do so than within one's waking moments, when their defenses were the lowest.

Voldemort' ranks were cruel and calculating, containing master tacticians whom she both admired and loathed with every fiber of her being. Yet despite this admiration, she would die before allowing them in.

Silently she swore this, and in the dimmed room the girl did the only thing she knew how to.

She fought.

As the woman's arrogant laughter filled the room, for the girl was no match for the woman's training, a crucial mistake was made, for in that one moment of underestimation the Mudblood was able to push back, catching sight of what the woman was really after.

Lord Voldemort was in the room, unseen to the girl's eyes, and the girl suddenly understood that she was the bait that was to lure in the true prey.

Hermione Granger began screaming for her best friend to block out everything Voldemort showed him.

A cruel light cut through the air, and as the girl fell defenseless to the Cruiciatious curse, passing into another pain induced slumber, Harry Potter tossed violently within his own.

"Sit!"

The small of her back hit the backboard of the chair, painfully.

Yet that was nothing in comparison to what she would do to Regulus. Over the past few hours, where they had been all but forced to remain holed up in Dumbledore's office, her opinion of Regulus had done a complete 180, followed by a 360. And now he had been presumptuous enough to physically force her away from the door, which she had been using in an attempt to vacate the premises.

She felt needed elsewhere.

She snapped her wand out, aiming at her infuriating cousin with every intention of ordering him to stand aside, when Dumbledore's voice thundered loudly, its ancient baritones echoing throughout the tower.

"Enough!"

Breathing heavily, her dark eyes fixated furiously upon Regulus' complacent expression, her voice addressed the Headmaster. Unsurprisingly her tones were less than pleased at the information she had just gleaned from their impromptu meeting.

It had been the reason for her failed attempts to leave.

"Explain..." She spoke less than warily, "How you can justify refusing to allow me, an Auror in case you forgot, to retrieve Harry when you have just admitted that you know where he is? I can be trusted to find him!" Regulus scoffed loudly at this, receiving a swift kick in his unprotected shin.

Ignoring his grimace and failed attempts at dignity she continued adamantly. "Headmaster...one student has already been killed, and if Harry is out there alone he..."

"He is not alone."

She closed her eyes, drawing an annoyed breath between her teeth. "Oh?"

Dumbledore seemed vaguely amused by her reaction. "Of course not. He is with another student."

Tonks blinked, flabbergasted. Suddenly she was having a very hard time separating her sworn oath as an Auror to do all she could to protect the innocent, with her oath to the Order to trust its membership and its founder. Particularly when that same founder had just finished informing her that he had known the location of three of the missing students all along, yet had failed to inform the Ministry officials and Order members scouring Hogsmeade of that apparently miniscule fact.

"A student...and who would that happen to be?" She muttered, choosing to put it simply.

Dumbledore removed his spectacles, polishing them gently. "Kalliandra Kaylens."

Her eyes widened in hopes that she had misheard. "That girl Remus has been tutoring?" She nearly shouted. "She's practically a Muggle!"

Dumbledore cast a curious glance her way. "Sometimes you may be surprised at what non-magical people are capable of."

Regulus sneered, "Oh yes...I'm sure they are naturals at evading the Unforgivables of the Dark Lord's servants."

"Of course you'd know all about that wouldn't you Reggie?" Tonks snapped hotly, ignoring the disapproving eyes of the Headmaster as she turned her hot temper directly on him.

"What in the name of Merlin are you thinking Headmaster?" She questioned shrilly. "You've allowed half of the Order to think that Harry is missing yet tell the ex-Death Eater on the spot the second everyone is out of earshot..."

"I'm in earshot!"

"Shut up!" Tonks and Regulus shouted simultaneously as Regulus practically flew across the room, giving the already closed door a good kick. Crusantheus, the door knocker, could be heard swearing violently on the other side.

"Tonks..." Dumbledore said, sounding slightly amused, "I have my reasons for doing things."

Regulus' eyebrow arched so high Tonks swore he must have stolen Snape's patented look of smugness.

"Allow me to venture a wager..." Regulus interjected snidely, looking pointedly at her. "But I am guessing that Dumbledore does not trust everyone in this little bird society you have both spoken so adamantly about tonight."

It was ludicrous, yet she knew her cousin's point held a note of truth.

"Isn't it a shame, Nymphadora..." Regulus continued, pacing in front of her seated figure, "When you cannot even trust your fellow bird watchers with the whereabouts of the baby chicks?"

She scowled, forcing herself to look away from his look of superiority. Instead she observed what Dumbledore was doing, watching as the quills finished penning upon each scroll, then rolling themselves in succession, the ink already fading upon each.

It was a trick of the Order, used only in times where the utmost of security was needed, for only those bearing the mark of the phoenix would be able to see the truth printed upon those scrolls.

The use of it disturbed her greatly, for why would Dumbledore need risk penning instructions when he could inform each recipient verbally via flow?

"Headmaster..." She said warily. "Please let me retrieve Harry. As an Auror you have to understand that I cannot stand aside and allow Harry and Kalliandra to be put in danger." She stood, ignoring Regulus' attempts to block her path, and strode straight to the window overlooking the castle grounds. Dumbledore stood besides this same window, an odd look deepening his already lined features.

"Headmaster..." She said, eyes shining with urgency. "You know better than anyone what kind of people are after Harry. Just tell me where he is at, because wherever he is he could get..."

"Killed?" Dumbledore supplied, tearing his eyes from the dark scenery. "Tonks, I understand your concern. Yet if we never allow Harry to survive on his own how can we expect him to survive this war?"

She frowned, her silence his answer.

The Headmaster nodded solemnly. "The time when we could protect the children from the horrors of war has long since passed. Now all we can do is hope that we have prepared them well enough."

Tonks sighed sadly, watching as the quills began inscribing the names of the addresses upon the rolled papyrus scrolls. Harry's name was amongst them, but not Remus.

Turning to Dumbledore she questioned him with her eyes. "What if we haven't?"

A comforting hand touched her shoulder, Dumbledore's twinkling eyes again holding a sense of hope.

"If I'm not mistaken, I do believe you were always a strong proponent of giving at least Harry more freedom. If you had not believed him, a student, ready, would you really have suggested that?"

Swallowing she nodded, glancing towards where Kenneth and Emily slumbered, a loud snore from Kenneth the sudden draw of her attention.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Perhaps we ought to move them to my private quarters. I dare say they could possibly be more comfortable there."

She nodded vaguely, and within minutes was levitating the Irish President in a very undignified way, his arms and legs hanging slack as he sleep danced through the highly arched doorway, leaving the office of the Headmaster and entering Dumbledore's private study.

Regulus followed behind, Emily in his arms, and the most peculiar expression upon his face. He rather looked as if he had drunk sour milk containing the elixir of life. Regardless the expression vanished as he placed her upon the couch besides her father, a look of relief overtaking him as he rid himself of the seven year old burden.

"Nymphadora?"

Her hands froze upon the woolen blanket, the one she had been draping across her charges sleeping forms, for Dumbledore's voice was no longer right behind her.

Trepidation shook her.

Turning, as if in slow motion, her brain recognized that except for her sleeping charges, that she was now alone in the room.

Both her cousin and the Headmaster stood just beyond the room's threshold, a look of resigned solemnity upon their faces.

"I am sorry Nymphadora..." Dumbledore's voice floated through the doorway eerily. "But there is something I must do, and I have a feeling that Regulus may be the only one willing to stand witness without protestation."

What ritual?

The study's finely carved door began swinging shut.

She bolted for them, not knowing why, yet knowing there was no time. Her feet flew across the flooring, her eyes catching sight of the papyrus scroll clutched within Dumbledore's aging hand, its addressee forever burning into the young Auror's mind.

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

It was only then that it finally dawned on her...what Dumbledore intended to do. And as she tripped, falling flat upon the floor, her eyes upturned, straining for a sight of the ceiling within the Headmaster's office.

Upon the tower's conical ceiling were the ancient words of power, and they were the last sight she had before the study door slammed shut with a resonating finality.

Lying stunned upon the floor her thoughts faltered, for upon the parchment bound for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named an ancient oath was surely inscribed. Dumbledore's magical signature was the one responsible for writing it beneath the structure of power, and thus she knew that Dumbledore had sworn to meet with the most dire of villains to begin the negotiations for the surviving student of his.

Hermione Granger.

Beneath the door a fiery tendril could be seen.

The blood bound ritual had begun...

In the thick of night lightning flashed.

Shadows were streaking across the ground, illuminating the dark abyss surrounding those who slumbered far from the oncoming storm. There, deep beneath the darkened boughs of night, dreams both haunting and beseeching plagued the girl's listless turnings within the arms of Morpheus.

Yet something far more solid than the purveyor of dreams clung to the girl, smoothing away the gooseflesh rising upon her frigid skin, for even as the man she leant against dreamt his promise to safeguard was being unconsciously kept.

In his arms the girl failed to hear the oncoming storm, only awakening from her chilled slumber as the calloused hands around her tightened, the man's steady breathing falling and rising erratically, for REM was suddenly failing to suppress his voluntary muscular systems.

Something had changed...

Kally was flung to the ground with a start, her body hitting the dew kissed soil with forceful intensity.

Coughing, there upon the ground, she scrambled away, rolling and slipping as the sky thundered, the first droplet of the icy onslaught catching her in the face. Reflex born of one cruel monster's sadism, and a lifetime of paranoia, sent her scattering from her protector on instinct.

Sliding upon the dew kissed soil, scrambling to her feet, blinking back the dregs of sleep and the dark of night, her mind finally processing what was occurring she ceased to act. Standing there with the wind

whipping bitterly around her, the rising air's chill seeping through her inadequate clothing, she laid eyes upon her unwilling assailant.

Potter...

The mind numbing confusion that befell her, the kind that always seemed to accompany his presence, returned as she watched him. His bright eyes closed against the brewing storm, his face contorted, and even from where she stood she could see the frenzied peaks and valleys his heaving chest made.

It was happening again, the thing she had merely glimpsed that night in the common room, falling victim to it within the torch-lit corridors...

Without rational thought she ran to him, the one she barely knew, who had foolishly saved her life on more occasions than she cared to count. Dropping besides him, her knees sinking into the damp mud, she felt her fingers stall, uncertainty gripping her chilled form.

Something was amiss...this sensation...the uncertainty...it was foreign and fleeting...

Though life's cruelties had once taught her the demons of inaction.

Forcing herself, willing herself to act, she gripped his shoulders, calling his name as loudly as she dared. In the quickening breeze the blanket that had sheltered them billowed out, tumbling with the wind to lay sprawled across the wet ground.

"Pott-tter..." The chill crept into her voice, the wind stealing her words for its own cagey purpose. Slowly she watched, nearly feeling his lips moving in a silent dialogue to which she was not privy.

Beneath her fingers she felt the growing rigidity of his shoulder, a terrifying intensity radiating from him as the rain began to fall in thick torrents, rainwater splattering upon his sweat dampened brow.

When the life giving water reached his unsightly scar, a sizzling rose into the air.

Lightning criss-crossed the night.

One-one thousand...

Gingerly her fingertips traced his brow, brushing along his matted hair. Before the searing sensation within her flesh even registered her hand was recoiling, a repressed cry of pain caught within her throat.

In the darkness she could not see her reddened fingertips, but she knew the burns to be there.

Two-one thousand...

Voice constricted, from what she knew not, for nothing in the magical world could now surprised her, she screamed at him. Foolishly she screamed, roaring in a contest to rise above the wind as she gripped his shoulder, shaking his already vibrating form.

His Adam's apple rose and fell, as if he too were screaming to be heard by one incapable of doing so.

Three one-thousand...

"Potter..." She questioned, knowing her voice would not reach him. "What's happening to you?"

Four-one thousa...

Thunder shook the sky, a carnal howl carrying upon the wind from a distance far too close. Her narrowed eyes flew to the forest, ill-equipped as they were to reveal its hidden dangers.

God Remus...where are you... He would be able to see, to penetrate the night's veil.

Unconsciously, as her ill fated thoughts plagued her, her fingers coiled around Harry's shoulders, relishing the odd protection his proximity brought in the face of the unknown.

Teeth chattering she began a silent mantra.

"One-one thousand..."

Within her ears the steady rhythm of her heart pounded achingly loud, and further howls cutting upon the gusts of the growing onslaught sent a current running through her chilled veins.

"Two-one thousa..."

Again the sky split open, rumbling as if hell itself were fighting to break through, and as if in some cruel unison with the sky pain erupted around her slender, unclothed arm.

Tight fingers now clenched callously around her wrist, her free hand slipping from Harry's shoulder, clutching at his fingers, prying them away from the crushing force of his strong hands.

In the eerie light of the storm she struggled with him, his sleeping figure writhing against her as if he were a man watching, silently reliving, the slaughter of all he held dear.

She too had learnt the truth of such horrors far too young...

A strangled sound resounded within his throat, her own constricting at the pained creases lining his sweat soaked brow.

"Damn you Potter..." She implored breathlessly, feeling his unwavering grip tightening further. "Come back..."

Thunder clapped across the expansive sky, her breath coming out in ever clearer clouds. "You're insufferable..." She gasped through clenched, chattering teeth. "Potter please... this hurts so much..."

Somehow, despite the howl of the wind, her frightened pleas broke through, reaching the God of Sleep, for Morpheus released his vice grip upon the King of Idiocy's psyche.

In a moment, in one short, sharp spasm, she was yanked against him, thrown across his legs as he jerked awake.

Frightened and cutting jade eyes flew open, staring through the cold rain at her, not fully seeing...

Yet pain and shame swelled within them.

Coughing, breathing heavily from her exertion and up swelling of fear for he alone, her words came unbidden.

"What happened?"

Blinking the water from his eyes, his glasses long since flung to the ground, he swallowed painfully, his voice coming out in hoarse rasps.

"Kaylens..." He rasped, "He's got her."

"Of course..." She murmured sardonically. "Yes...that explains everything..."

With measured movements she slowly removed herself from where she lay upon his saturated legs, collapsing onto the muddied ground besides him. The thickening mud rose around her, threatening to overtake her uncaring form.

"Potter..." She finally whispered, allowing her eyes to flicker shut. "What just happene..."

"Don't make me lie to you." He whispered brokenly. "I won't. I can't."

Somehow, as she felt his form moving to shield her from the elements, she managed a response.

"Harry..." She murmured incredulously, "Then tell me. Who has who?"

Her eyes flickered open, and the sharpest jade in the world locked onto her own.

"Voldemort has Hermione."

Remus staggered from the bowels of the Forbidden Forest. From where he had been drug, and left.

"You're services are no longer required blood traitor. Our Lord shall summon you when our services are again...needed."

Lucius' words were chilling. Though not nearly as much as his deeds this night.

He remembered everything...

Even now the blood lust taunted him, alluring him with its putrid aroma rising from his tattered clothing.

Ron's blood...

Before him loomed Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, his slow gait leading him past the ragged looking Ministry officials.

He was just another injured bystander to them, and was paid no heed.

On the grounds a dusty creme tent flapped in the violent wind, Medi wizards roaming around the opening in the canvas. Within its illuminated interior he glimpsed haggard parents lining up with their children, bags in tow, as they waited for Ministry transport away from the scene of today's crimes.

No one would chance a walk to Hogsmeade, not now, not even with Ministry protection.

With staggering steps Remus made his way to the castle. He had a report to make, and a sin to beg penance for.

The certainty swimming within his eyes was astounding. Even in the dark of night, as he hovered above her prostate form, she recognized that.

Her lips parted, a silent question unspoken as his illogical assumption settled in, for how could one know the whereabouts of one they could not see?

They couldn't. He couldn't. And yet...

She believed him.

In the past he had been unkind and cruel, illogical and brash, and yet he had never given her a reason to doubt nor distrust him.

Everything that had passed between them before had been the indirect result of her own secrecy, of her own perpetuated lies, of her own sins...

He had been right to call her a Death Eater. Though she had not know of the title, she was as good as one.

Blinking the rain from her eyes she took a chance.

Her first chance.

"So...what do we do?" She asked.

His silence was palpable. The cracking of breaking boughs in the forest, their tumultuous descents to the forest floor, and their final soggy smack against it were all she heard above the wind.

His jaw remained slack.

"Potter?" She whispered, knowing he now read her lips, for her soft reply was inaudible.

His wet hair swayed as his head was shaken, slinging water upon her as his muddy hand curled around her arm. "You believe me."

It was a statement. Not a question.

Shivering, the bone deep chill taking over, she nodded. "S-shocking, I k-know."

His solemn regard studied her, eyes moving to where his hand lay. A perplexed expression broke his silence.

"Did I hurt you?"

His tone carried a note of self disgust, yet the corners of her mouth tugged gently upwards at his concern.

"C-couldn't if you t-ried," She stammered.

A hollow chortle escaped his throat, his hand rising along her arm, smoothing away the gooseflesh rising upon her arm. "Good..." He responded. "Because we have to leave."

Her face scrunched up, her blue-tinged lips no longer felt by her.

"How?"

Grasping her with both hands he assisted in up-righting her, rubbing her arms vigorously. "We walk..." He whispered, "Run if necessary, and hope that nothing eats us."

As if on cue, from the depths of the forest's shadows, a wolf emerged.

Her shaky breathing froze Potter's hands upon her, his intuition alerting him of what she already knew.

"Run..."

He wanted to lie to himself, to tell himself that he had not committed the deeds that he had.

The truth persisted.

Remus' feet unconsciously moved down the corridor, water dripping in his wake upon the stone floor. He had not reported into Dumbledore. He had not alerted the Order of his return.

There was something he had to do first.

Remus pushed open the hospital wing door, leaving a muddy imprint where his hand had resided.

Silence greeted him within the candlelit infirmary, the only respite the sound of distant thunder as the storm rolled south, away from Hogwarts' grounds. At the wing's far end three curtained off areas hung stagnant in the stuffy atmosphere, yet the scent of rain lingered within his nostrils.

And blood...

It didn't take the inner eye to know that his victim lay nearby.

His echoing footsteps led him to the first sectioned area, where he found what he was looking for.

Ronald Weasley sat upright, gazing out the window upon the sliver of quarter moon peeking through the storm clouds.

Remus' stomach twisted rebelliously as a voice broke the silence.

"You want to talk?"

Remus remained frozen to the spot, nodding as he felt the verdict of an elusive execution trial being handed down.

Remus was sure that they had already told the Weasley's youngest son his fate, and by now the changes would have already begun, affecting his senses...his scent...

His presence would confirm what the young Gryffindor most likely already suspected. Ron would now know the one responsible for condemning him.

Turning on the surgically clean white tile, Remus dimly remembered the reason for why the stone flooring had been overlain with the Muggle alternative, for even a strong round of scourgifying spells

were not enough to remove the stain of blood from ancient stone. The past war had brought far too much of that within Hogwarts walls, and tile was much easier to clean.

Fleetingly, Remus wondered if his own blood were about to again, be removed from it.

His eyes rose shamefully to the boy he had cursed, his pride forcing himself to not look away as he awaited whatever hateful words were sure to come, for he was surely deserving of them.

Though none did.

"Ronald..." His voice came out thick and gravely, articulateness abandoning him. "Whatever you ask...This is the second time I've endangered you and I..." He faltered. "I am sorry..."

It took every ounce of his rapidly diminishing bravery to remain standing in the presence of one he had so horribly wronged.

Lightning illuminated the room, filtering in through the hospital wing windows, and Ron set his jaw. "You didn't mean to bite me, so don't worry about it."

Thunder rolled, vibrating the tiles beneath his soles.

Ron cringed, obviously unaccustomed to the sudden amplification of all surrounding sounds.

Such was the effect of becoming a lycan.

As the thunder diminished, his former pupil frowned pensively. "For the first time in my life Professor.. I'm different." The teenager extended five of his digits, frowning further at the sight of the abnormality lying just beneath the surface. "Everything...from now on..." He continued oddly, "It is all going to be different."

Shame nearly sent Remus tumbling to his knees. "All because of my recklessness... again...you could have been ki..."

"So could have you," Ron cut in sharply. "Yet that didn't stop you from doing your duty, Professor."

In the moment of silence that followed, the youngest Weasley suddenly did something completely unexpected. A slow, sad smile crept across his features, and then Ronald Billius Weasley looked him directly in the eye.

"Whatever the reason was for sending you out to cavort with those other..." Ron swallowed hard, "werewolves... It had to be important, otherwise you wouldn't have been there."

Remus remained silent. He could not give into his own self-deprecating desire to turn and flee, he owed the new werewolf more than that.

"This is a war. Before you bit me I had no real talent to offer." The young man's words were slow, and for once, painstakingly thought out. "To everyone I was just...a hindrance, just another mediocre wizar..."

"Your power was never mediocre," Remus interjected painfully.

Ron shook his head, his fingers scrunching the stark white of the hospital sheets. "It doesn't matter...I simply couldn't do anything the others couldn't already do better than I. But now..."

Light blue eyes looked up, meeting his haunted ones. "But now Professor..."

Remus again nearly choked at the ill-bestowed title. "I haven't been your Professor for some time Ronald."

A rather dangerous expression touched Ron's mouth. "Well..." He said, flexing his fingers. "That's about to change."

And with reflexive speed, right where Ron's fist had been clenched around them, Remus realized that the hospital sheets now lay shredded.

Where Ron's fingers should be, there were claws.

Cold comprehension dawned upon him, for somehow the boy had inherited the ability to transform at will, yet the bloodlust Remus felt running within his own veins was nowhere to be seen within the boy's eyes.

All that lay there was a dangerous glint.

"My friends are out there, and I intend to find them." Ron avowed.
"So..."

A carnal quality edged into the young Weasley's voice.

Blue, ovular eyes, met his own.

"So Lupin... How'd the Order fancy a second set of ravenous fangs?"

Chapter 26 The Reason for the War

It had taken her all of ten minutes to figure it out.

Breathing heavily, her mousy hair strewn about, she again rose her leg to drive the full force of her weight against the mahogany doorframe. The sound reverberated throughout the room, echoing from the ancient stone walls in a way that mirrored her increasing, self-directed anger.

She should have known.

Cursing she stepped back from the unmoving entryway, her feet stumbling clumsily across the uneven floor boards. Her dark eyes swept the high rafters criss crossing the cylindrical tower, at a loss.

Dumbledore had long since earned the title normally reserved for Remus alone, for that 'damnable man' had thought of every conceivable escape attempt and blocked her progress at every turn. One thing was certain: The Headmaster was surely against anyone knowing of his plan, and from the looks of things she would not be escaping any time soon. Certainly not in time to alert anyone before it was too late.

If only she had realized! Then she wouldn't be trapped like some mythical Rapunzel caught in a hellish fairy tale.

Her eyes landed upon the dark window frame, her mind briefly mulling over the possibility of growing her hair into a long enough plait to send Emily scurrying down.

She snorted. Even if the Bothans were not under an enchanted sleep Kenneth would surely skin her alive before allowing her to turn his daughter into an impromptu acrobatic chimpanzee. Of course Emily had seemed rather taken by that exhibit at the Phoenix Park Zoo...

As if reading her thoughts Kenneth growled a little.

Men... She thought angrily. Even in their sleep they shot down her ideas!

Turning her attention to the door frame she did the only thing she could think of, and rearing back her leg she charged. Only this time the door swung open as if in sync with the gods of clumsiness, and she found herself sprawled across the Headmaster's emptier office.

Rolling onto her back, flopping like a fish on the floor, her dark eyes fixated furiously upon her cousin.

"You..." She roared, kicking the door to the study shut with her feet. She was not eager for Kenneth nor Emily to hear this if they awoke at this rather untimely interval.

Regulus gazed down his nose in astonishment. "Cousin were you really waging war on his study door the entire time? You do realize that is hand-crafted mahogany?"

Growling she scrambled to her feet, "I swear to Merlin Regulus...you tricked me! You allowed him to..."

He scoffed loudly. "No one allows Albus Dumbledore to do anything cousin. He merely does it whether you are in concurrence with his decisions or not. Surely you would be aware of that by now."

"He's right you know..."

"Shut up Crusantheus!"

Regulus cast an unnaturally sympathetic look at the door as she again rounded on him.

"He made the Unbreakable vow didn't he?" She demanded. "He's going to trade himself for Hermione Granger if he can isn't he? And you let him!"

"Like I could stop him? Besides, it wasn't that bad of an idea..."

"You could have refused to stand witness!" She hollered. "He couldn't have done it without one!"

Regulus' eyes roamed the room curiously, as if she were an inconsequential bug, before his eyes finally landed upon a small cabinet. "Well..." He commented, walking towards it. "If not I he would have found another person to..."

"The Order needs him Regulus!" She shouted, tailing him closer than a shadow. "We can't survive witho..."

Regulus spun to face her. "Don't devalue yourself cousin. From what he said he may have founded your little aviary organization, but he is no more important than the rest of you within it."

She gasped. "You jest?"

The perfect image of stone glowered back. "Do I look like one to jest?"

Her breath came in furious puffs as he began rummaging through the contents of Dumbledore's deceptively small liquor cabinet. A considerable time passing before he emerged, a tight, satisfied line straining his mouth, and a garnet hued bottle in hand.

She was barely collecting herself, her wand arm twitching dangerously as she seriously contemplated whether or not her cousin was an alien species.

"Le Vin de Chateau Latour..." Regulus commented admiringly, ignoring her as if nothing of significance had occurred. "Dix-neuf soixante-dix, une belle année."

Her teeth ground so hard she swore to God he would be receiving the dental bill.

"For the less refined in the room," He continued, his unfaltering eyes never leaving his recently procured prize, "Nineteen seventy was an excellent year."

A loud pop resonated within the room, the rising hue of her cheeks evidencing her increasing blood pressure. Merlin...she was getting as bad as Kingsley with that!

"This particular vintage," Regulus continued undeterred, "Presently runs over one hundred and twenty four pounds a bottle. Just imagine what it may have run once fully matured. A shame this Latour takes ten to fifteen years..."

Between her gritted teeth she managed a growl. Regulus ignored this, painstakingly choosing a rather worn and bright orange mug from Dumbledore's limited glass selection. His nose crinkled in distaste as the mug's emblem Go Cannons sparkled up at him.

"Allowing his vintages to go to waste..." Regulus grumbled disapprovingly, pouring the opaque, yet red fermentation into his mug moodily. "I would have thought better of the old man..."

"That old man has more moral fiber than you could ever wish to possess," She snapped.

"I don't doubt that," He replied evenly.

Her eyes widened furiously. "Why in the hell would Dumbledore take you into his confidence? You were a cowardous traito..."

Regulus' glass slammed down, shattering.

"NEVER PRESUME YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT NYMPHADORA!" He roared, eyes igniting dangerously. "I am far more familiar with each one of my treacherous, traitorous acts than you shall ever be. But know this..."

Regulus' bearing rose, despite his already rigidly erect posture.

"If it were not for those cowardly deeds of mine then the Muggle world would have been wiped out a long...time...ago." He hissed quietly. "My cowardly nature preserved the knowledge of what could have happened...keeping it safe until it was needed again..."

"You should have come forth with it sooner," She challenged. "As soon as you heard He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was back you should have..."

"Oh?" He snapped condescendingly. "And how was I supposed to know that my former slithering Lord had crawled back from the grave whilst in the Muggle realm Nymphadora? Particularly when those of you at the Ministry do your best to isolate our world from the Muggle realm? Well congratulations Nymphadora! Because despite Voldemort's best efforts at mayhem and misery your precious Ministry has done its job well! Not a word of his return leaked to me, even though I was listening for word!"

Seething venomously she leveled her wand at him, eliciting a derisive laugh. "Where's Dumbledore?"

"Why at a meeting with that slithering serpent of a Dark Lord I suspect. Surely you could have guessed that at least."

Her heart thudded unnaturally.

"Let me out Regulus."

"I wish I could cousin," He said, turning back to the wine. "But it was his desire for neither of us to leave until the deal was complete. Something about pesky, meddlesome, bullheaded Aurors..."

She growled, resisting the urge to attack.

Regulus merely snorted. "I would think that you, being part of his little aviary society, would by now realize that he knows what he is doing. Even I know tha..."

Swearing loudly she kicked the wall, rattling Phineas' portrait, forcing their long dead relative to hang onto his frame's edge for fear of being dislodged from it.

Regulus mouth twitched wickedly, ignoring the choice words that came flying their way as he addressed his cousin. "Now if you want to destroy the portraits then by all means, do so Nymphadora. However, in the interim it seems that your best bet is to relax and have a drink, because you clearly need one."

Scowling she slapped the proffered glass away.

Now it was Regulus' turn to regard her as if she were an alien species.

Elsewhere in the castle Remus had discovered that he had developed a shadow, one with a distinct limp and a blinding shock of red hair.

"You're sure about this?" Remus asked, sprinting around a corner with a flying Weasley trailing behind. Ron had just finished recounting what he had overheard the adults speaking about as he and Ginny had feigned sleep in the wing, and Remus was left with an uneasy feeling of coldness.

Not only were Harry and Hermione missing, but so was Kalliandra. Ron had had no information regarding Tonks, and knowing her profession...

Remus had felt slightly ill at the idea of any of them suffering while he had strolled leisurely down the castle's corridors, unable to go faster for fear of leaving the sick ward's escapee behind, which was precisely why he had thrown a levitation charm at the young man, sparing Ron the trouble of having to fight with his self-sizing crutches.

Molly Weasley would have him shipped to St. Mungos in individually plastic wrapped pieces if she ever caught wind of this.

Ron's face, screwed in careful concentration as he attempted to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling, shot him a withering look.

"My friends are out there Remus, and I don't intend to sit idly by while the Order hems and haws over what the best course of action is. I want into the Order, and I want to help."

"And if they vote against that?"

Ron grinned tensely. "I'll threaten to give them a friendly nip on the leg. After all, I've missed dinner tonight."

Remus nearly laughed, caught off guard. "Entertaining cannibalism are we?"

"Nah, Snape hardly qualifies as human so I seriously doubt it would count as cannibalizing. Especially since he's likely the only one to vote against me."

"You're forgetting your mother."

Ron paled considerably, his freckles standing out. "She'll just have to understand," He growled determinedly. "About Ginny too, she'll bounce back, and when she does she can help me find the bastard that Imperious-ed her."

Remus smiled sadly. Ron was more alike to Sirius than he would ever know. Perhaps that, more than anything, was why he had agreed to take Ron with him to give Dumbledore his shabby report.

As Ron had said, the good werewolves had to stick together, and he deserved to know of the underground werewolf activity as much as anyone.

The other werewolves could still out there...

The thought spurred him into a faster sprint, and ignoring the Gryffindor's sudden protest Remus began dashing down the stone corridors, his concern rising exponentially at the unnatural quiet upon the school.

Snapping the password he and the floating Ron mounted the stairs to Dumbledore's office, a riotous argument increasing in volume as they approached. Forgoing formality he set Ron down hastily, grasping the door handle and tugging.

It was locked.

"Headmaster!" He shouted, pounding upon it fiercely. "Headmaster I ne..."

"Remus!"

At the voice his fist froze, inches above the cringing bronze Crusantheus, the argument within the office grinding to an unceremonious halt.

"Tonks!" He shouted with barely concealed relief. "Tonks wha..."

"Oh thank God!" Interrupted Crusantheus, moaning. "They've been going at it for an hour! I can't take it anymore!"

Remus was about to inquire as to 'who' precisely had been going at it when Ron's confused mutterings interrupted him.

"Since when did Dumbledore get a talking door knocker?"

"Since his brother had me imported from Scotland little man," Snapped Crusantheus indignantly.

Ron bristled, "Little?"

Remus dropped a staying hand upon Ron's shoulder. "Best not to engage in conversation..." He muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Crusantheus' own dropped wide. "I heard..."

"We know!" Shouted two voices simultaneously from the opposite side of the door.

Remus' ears reflexively picked up, the familiarity of the unidentified vocalizations unnerving. "Tonks let us in," He shouted, frowning.

"We can't!" He heard her moaning, "Dumbledore made an Unbreakable vow and has left to speak to You-Know-Who and he's locked us in here! We can't get out and no one can get in!"

It took a moment for her words to process correctly, and apparently it did for Ron as well because simultaneously they both voiced aloud their thoughts.

"What?"

A distinct banging could be heard from within the office, as if someone had taken to kicking random objects.

Again, the unidentified masculine voice floated beneath the door. "You might as well tell them..."

"Tonks who is that?" Remus interjected.

There was a pause.

A very long pause.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," Remus insisted.

"Later Wolfy."

He groaned, while Crusantheus snickered. In response Ron grabbed the knocker and began banging vigorously, only ceasing the hostilities when Crusantheus nearly bit off his fingers.

Remus ignored this. "Tonks tell me I misheard..."

"You didn't," She groaned. "Hermione Granger is missing." Ron paled considerably, his shoulders stiffening at the reminder. "You-Know-Who has got her, and Dumbledore thinks it's to lure Harry into telling him the prophe..."

"WHAT?" Ron shouted, clearly having been deprived of this knowledge. "Tonks did they find Harry? He can't do tha..."

"Remus what the hell is Ron Weasley doing with you? Isn't he supposed to be in the..."

"Hospital wing," Remus supplied.

"I'd like to put him in the hospital wing," Growled Crusantheus menacingly, snapping eagerly with his jaw's hinge.

"Bugger off you rusted piece of..."

"RONALD!"

Crusantheus bronze tongue began clinking out a gleeful tune, clearly ecstatic at Tonks' reprimand. "Aha! Better stifle it Fingers or Ms. Windpipes in there will shut you up for me before you can say Hoggy, Hoggy, Hogwa..."

Remus finally gave in to the urge to silence the damn thing, unable to think. Crusantheus' sudden silence earned him a loud exclamation as the unidentified voice from within began praising the lord and maker.

He knew that voice...

"So Nymphadora you want to tell them or should I?" Asked the man, sounding as if he were clearly enjoying something.

Behind him Ron made a strangled sound of realization.

"Sirius?"

A loud thump evidenced the unidentified man's displeasure.

"If I get mistaken for Sirius one more time I'll hex that door knocker ..."

Crusantheus began pounding his handle furiously, a panicked look in his bronze eyes.

Tonks, on the other hand, sounded like she was tap-dancing. "Ah-ha! I'm not the only one who made that mista..."

"You're my cousin! You have no excuse!"

"Bugger off! We thought you were dead!"

"Really Nymphadora you have no creativity..."

Really...You Gryffindors have no creativity...

Remus' mind spun, an echo from the past striking a dissonant chord.

Staring at the locked door something clicked.

"Regulus! " He growled, smashing himself against the door. "I swear to God if you've harmed her..."

"Nymphadora were you and your friends hit with a paranoia charm? You can answer me honestly with full faith that this conversation will remain confidential."

"Oh yes, don't mind us!" Chimed in several unseen portraits.

"So you're a psychiatrist and a physician?" Tonks spluttered.

"Tonks?" He shouted through the door. "Tonks! What the hell is going on in there?"

"Apparently an epiphany," Drawled Regulus lazily.

"Shut it both of you!" Tonks snapped furiously, the sound of stamping feet reaching his perked ears.

He withdrew his ear from the door just in time, its entire frame shuddering violently as she kicked it from the other side, rendering Crusantheus cross-eyed.

Mahogany door or not, Remus suddenly wondered if that were thick enough to protect him from whatever hex the pissed off Auror had in mind for him. He knew her far too well to entertain any hope of escaping completely unscathed.

Sneakily, with stealth indicative of the low marks she had received on the Stealth and Tracking portion of her Auror examinations, a wand tip snuck beneath the crack between the door and floor.

Remus stared at this odd action, puzzlement the name of his expression. Unfortunately he hesitated just a second too long, for a hot stream of searing sparks suddenly ignited his trousers, a vindicated Ah-ha resounding from the pink haired wonder witch as Remus hopped around, nearly tumbling down the winding staircase in his attempts to douse them.

"Made her angry did you?"

As Ron snickered he had to forcibly restrain himself from snarling in the Weasley's general direction.

"Tonks," He groaned hoarsely, leg still steaming. "What on earth is wrong?"

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" She clipped with disbelief. "You show up after nearly a month and..."

"Two weeks," He corrected, re-approaching the door as if it were a shark.

"Fine...Two weeks and..."

"Did the idea of talking it through like rational adults ever occur to either of you?" Regulus' muffled voice interjected curiously.

"Stuff a sock in it Reggie," She barked. "The fanged wonder has emerged from his self-induced isolation and now he wants to know what's wrong."

Another loud thump shook the door, his stomach wrenching as he practically felt her leaning against the other side.

Cautiously approaching he ignored Ron's startled stare, pressing his hands against the rough grain. "Tonks..." He whispered gratingly, "I...We don't have time for this now..."

"Gee, what a surprise!" She exclaimed sardonically. "Wolfy doesn't have time for me, who would've thought?"

Regulus emitted a low whistle, clearly closer than before. "Trouble in paradise Lupin? Honestly isn't she a little young for you?"

The distinct sound of someone being smacked echoed through the door and down the stairwell. The heavy sensation within his chest failing to improve.

"At risk of being hexed..."

Remus turned, eyeing Ron with barely concealed annoyance.

The Gryffindor swallowed loudly. "Harry's still out there and we have to find him. We could send Hedwig..."

"Dumbledore already sent Fawkes," Tonks muttered. "He's a step ahead of us as always, yet kept muttering about how Harry could fend for himself now."

Remus' brow furrowed. It was not like Dumbledore to leave someone unaided. Not at all.

"Slow to catch on as always Nymphadora," Regulus remarked condescendingly. "Did it ever occur to you that in lieu of sending a potentially slow scout..."

"I am not slow..."

"Of course not," Regulus snorted. "But rather than letting a search party gallivant around the area, risking further loss of life, he did the smart thing."

"Which is?" Remus could hear Tonks practically hiss through her teeth.

"He sent the fastest messenger he could," He responded smugly. "Surely you don't fancy yourself in the same class of speed as a phoenix, do you cousin?"

Remus' eyes widened in understanding. "He sent them a portkey."

"Exactly..."

Suddenly everything came together, and it gave him an idea.

"Ron, Tonks..." He stumbled to explain. "I have to..."

"We know," Tonks muttered. "You have to go."

He hesitated.

"What's the hold up Lupin, you're quite good at that so get on with it already."

Cringing inwardly he turned and ran for the owlery.

"I'll just stay here then?" Ron yelled sarcastically after his retreating figure.

On the other side of the door Tonks growled, dropped cross-legged to the ground, banged the back of her head against the door, and extended a pointed hand to Regulus.

Her cousin smirked, filling her a well needed glass.

Harry's heart skipped unnaturally. His breath froze. Instinctual alarms ignited a fiery anger within him.

As if in response his calloused fists unconsciously coiled tighter around her shoulders, clenching the soaked folds of her torn sweater as if doing so could somehow dispel the presence lurking within the shadows.

It could not.

A feral growl cut through the wind, the frigid breeze snaking around them, biting bitterly against his skin, whipping Kaylen's soaked hair around her ashen face.

There was nowhere to run...but they had to try.

Like a phantom sound upon the wind came the smacking of monstrous claws upon slick mud, the telltale sound of a beast bent on savagery as it stalked its prey across water-laden hunting grounds.

They were its prey...

Holding her resolute eyes with his, watching as her visage screwed into that of grim resolve, Harry knew he had no choice.

Loosening his hold upon her quietly heaving shoulders, watching the bloody bandages binding his palms sway in the wind, he ground out a single command.

"Run..."

His dark whisper was met with immediate action, for she took flight, mud splattering beneath her feet as she fled for the tree line, her tattered sweater billowing in the wind as she went.

Lightning from the war torn heavens illuminated the desolate battle ground, sending her shadowy silhouette stretching across the matted stretch of grass separating them.

Tensely he watched her, standing his ground.

He refused to follow.

Around him the power of the storm surged, thunder shaking the earth as his scarred fist clenched tightly around the fateful feather of the phoenix that lay deeply imbedded in his faithful holly, his wand arm hanging loosely by his side.

Blinking the water from his eyes he watched in muted fascination. Kaylens was suddenly aware of her solitude, her feet halting into a tumultuous skid across the hunting ground as she fought to stop against the raging wind. The mud finally ceased to give, resisting her sliding feet as her form went slipping beneath the forest's threshold, the dripping canopy throwing shadows across her countenance as she whorled around to regard him.

Beneath the branches her eyes flashed dangerously, for his deception and what it could mean had finally struck her with frightening force. With the detached sense of an onlooker observing an unstoppable calamity he watched as her form went rigid.

She knew there was no time to reach him. His ploy had worked.

Merely six meters separated he from her, yet the distance was uncrossable.

It was how he wanted it.

Thump, thump...

The swift approach of the werewolf's claws beat against the suctioning ground.

The wolf was charging him, yet he did not move.

Silently his eyes plead with Kaylens, urging her to run.

Thump, thump...

She did not. Her glorious eyes regarded him with profound hurt and anger, reflecting the lightning shocking through the heavens.

Thump, thump...

He stood still, feeling death's swift approach for another moment, closing his eyes in resignation for whatever would come to pass.

It was stupid, it was brash, it was the act of a true Gryffindor.

He had known there was no time for them to both run, so he had sent her unwittingly to what he could only pray was relative safety.

Thump, thump...

If he survived this she would surely kill him, and an odd smile crept upon his cracked lips at the absurdity of the thought.

Thump, thump...

All of it transpired in a second, his eyes flying wide as the sky split open, roaring as the gods themselves sent their electric fists hurtling down to join the fray.

Lightning struck as he hit the ground hard, ducking as he felt the wolf springing into the air to seize him. Jaws snapped around thin air, right where the back of his neck had been a second before.

The wolf's rear claws slashed out, grazing his back, shredding the fabric of his shirt, just scratching his skin's surface. A pained moan shot from his mouth, yet it was unheard as a fiery bolt of electric death struck the tree line with fearsome intensity.

He was already screaming for Kaylens' to move.

A carnal growl emanated before him, the werewolf's flight ending as its colossal form crashed back onto the earth with one sickening splat of mud and rain, its colossal form skidding on the slick ground as if upon ice.

"Kaylens move!" He screamed, watching as a fiery shower of embers rained down from the split trunk upon her.

Her golden head disappeared within the smoke, a burning tree limb crashing to where she had stood only a second before.

His stomach lurched sickeningly, a choking scream tearing through him, silenced only as the wolf's snarling snout reared around to face him again.

His eyes darkened in rage behind his rain streaked glasses, his wand arm flying out, a cutting hex ripping from his throat as he dove to the side, rolling in the thick sludge.

A pained howl signified that his aim had been true.

Desperately, heart pounding, he again let the cutting hex fly, followed by an onslaught of silver particles as he staggered to his feet, stumbling backwards in a frenzy as the wolf's brutalized pelt sent its recoiling body to the ground.

The silver particles were lodging within the animal's open wounds, and the metal's toxicity was quickly infiltrating its bloodstream.

He felt no pity, only agony as a fiery tendril coiled upwards from the ablaze branch, igniting the soaked canopy.

"Kaylens!" He screamed, bolting for the tree line, watching in horror as smoke began pluming upwards.

It was his fault...she hadn't seen it in time...she had been watching his personal battle instead of running farther...

And he had sent her there.

The noxious fumes came hurtling at him upon an icy gust, choking his lungs, and her name, which his lips had been expelling, came out instead as a ragged cough.

His glasses were somehow lost, dirt and smoke particles replacing them to cut against his retinas, a numbing sensation overtaking him.

He did not see the blow coming.

A massive paw struck him down, sending him hurtling face down into a puddle, his panicked world morphing into a watery brown blur.

His wand flew from his grip, skidding out of reach as he flailed, feeling the weight of the creature atop him as it forced his body to make a new imprint in the malleable earth.

The shallow water lapped around his ears, his mouth flapping around the ill-tasting soil, body sputtering as his traitorous lungs continued their ill-fated attempts to expel the poisonous smoke fumes from them, inhaling water instead.

The spine-crushing weight of the creature was suddenly dispelled, his head snapping up to gasp for breath, his hand blindly summoning his wand to it. The wandless act was lost upon him as a beastly forepaw smashed besides his aching head, an inch shy of shattering his skull.

Above him a new wolf growled venomously.

Flipping onto his back, rolling out of the way, he saw a tree limb lash out, striking the beast hovering above him with a sickening crunch.

The second werewolf, the one he had failed to see in time, fell limp to the ground.

Emerging from the burning alcove of trees Kalliandra callously threw the branch at the creature, ensuring another blow to its head as she appraised her handiwork. A second later her burning eyes were fixated upon him, a furious expression crossing her soot stained features as he was left sputtering upon the ground.

"What the hell were you thinking Potter!" She coughed out, her voice a harsh rasp. "This is the same stunt you pulled in Hogsmeade! Are you that daft!"

Still gasping for breath he realized that he had been right. She was going to kill him.

A ridiculously warm sensation flooded him. "Y-you're..."

"Pissed!" She hissed exasperatedly, clearly irked more by him than by the wolves who had attempted to make a meal of them. "You are

single handedly the most brash, idiotic, self-centered, suicidal individual that I have ever met! Next time, I'll let the wolves eat you!"

He blinked exhaustedly up at her, chest heaving with pained exertion as the disheveled, slightly charred girl above him ignored the insanely mud ridden, werewolf infested, ablaze world around them, contenting herself with staring him down.

He couldn't help it A small, relief filled smirk tugged at his lips.

"What," She grunted wearily, "Could you possibly find funny about this?"

He grinned. "A lot actually."

Her jaw dropped, flapping soundlessly as the wind sent smoke billowing in a dark cloud behind her, her hand instantly rising to shield her eyes from its thick residue.

"Kaylens," He commented, wiping mud from his face, "You're a rather angry person you know that?"

For a second she appeared to stutter. "Potter..." She threatened raspily, "I'm going to kill you."

He nodded solemnly, gingerly up-righting himself. "Well..." He grunted, pain searing his shoulder. "Get in line."

"Screw that. I get the first crack at..."

Her words ended in a grating cry, a chameleon-like hand having shot forth unseen in the billowing smoke, snatching her thick hair within its pitiless confines. Her soaked tresses were used as an anchor, the disillusioned man callously snapping her head back to expose the slender flesh of her neck to the splintered wood of a blackened wand.

Rain droplets splattered eerily in mid-air against the unseen adversary.

"Drop it Potter," Growled a voice as dark as the night.

The guttural growl sent something dangerous stirring within him, his forest colored eyes remaining glued to Kaylens' cringing countenance.

His brow furrowed as a strange idea began to take shape, his fingers loosened around the holly coated wand.

"Potter don't..." Kaylens' sharp cry was cut off as she was shoved forwards, nearly thrown from her feet by the Death Eater's swift prodding.

The Death Eater was holding her ahead of him, using her as a shield.

"I said drop it boy, or I'll make sure she stays dead this time."

Harry's hand went rigid, his wand falling into the mud.

"Attaboy."

The counter of the disillusionment charm was muttered as the villain advanced through the coiling smoke, holding Kalliandra ahead of him, the flames' orange light throwing the Death Eater's visceral face into stark focus.

Harry's blood ran cold.

Broussard's companion, the very one Harry had struck down with the killing curse that afternoon, the same one whom he had left for dead in Hogsemead's back alley, now stood shepparding Kaylens before him.

The dead man was alive and well.

"Ah...So you do remember me," The man hissed, eyes gleaming malevolently. "Perhaps you remember my brother, Broussard. I do believe you slashed his throat."

Kaylens hand shot up, yanking at the Death Eater's vice grip. "No less than he deserved you filth..."

A violent knee to the spine sent Kaylens crumbling to her knees, her form suspended by the callous grip on her long locks.

"To lose one's remaining family..." Continued the Death Eater with deadly calm, "In such a manner does not endear one to mercy."

"Now you know what it feels like!" Spat Kaylens, her hands clawing tightly at the man's massive forearms as he drug her forward.

The Death Eater ignored her, his foul gaze fixated upon him. "You're a foolish boy Potter...dabbling in Unforgivables... I'd kill you if I could..."

Harry vibrated with repressed rage, eyes darkening. "Then why don't you?" He challenged, "Get rid of the spare, and it'll be just you and I."

The villain laughed bitterly, "I'm not as stupid as some of the other lackeys boy. You'll have to improve your manipulations if you expect that to work."

"Fine," He spat darkly. "I'm unarmed, you're not. Care to let her go before that changes?"

"Wandless magic is a bit advanced for you bo..."

Something within him snapped, the unconscious magic he had drawn upon in moments of need finally snapping into place.

A shot of energy flew through him, the familiar wooden handle flying back to his hand, quickly summoned, drawn, and aimed.

Only where the Death Eater's heart had been now rested Kaylens, for the villain had yanked her forcibly from her knees to again shield him. Her cry of pain echoed through the clearing, rising above the crackling of burning wood.

"As intriguing as this is Potter, we came to deliver a message. Nothing more."

Harry's voice dropped to a growl, "Since when did a message entail taking my head off?"

The man's lips curled into a snarl, "It didn't. That was just fun."

"A rather perverse idea of fun, don't you think?"

"Considering what you did to my brother, I'd say I'm in the presence of similar company."

"He's nothing like you!" Kaylens shouted furiously.

A powerful yank sent her head snapping back, his insides lurching as the resounding crack of her protesting vertebrae.

"Quiet girlie!" Hissed the villain, spit dribbling as he spoke. "You're already an endangered species, I'd hate for you to go extinct."

"Ah yes," She spat scathingly, straining against the man's arms. "And I'm sure your precious master would be pleased with that."

Shaking violently he watched as she writhed against her captor, the callous man glaring vindictively down.

Hands coiling into tight fists, Harry began inching to the side, the sound of mud suctioning against shoe soles masked by the resounding thunder.

If he could get an angle around her, he could make his shot...

"And to think, I thought catching Veelas was the worst assignment...but no matter..."

It took everything he had to suppress his outward horror, for the man had already drawn and used the unseen dagger, plunging it shallowly into the flesh of her shoulder, dragging it across her skin. A second later the villain had a cylindrical vial held beneath her freely flowing blood, bottling it as her eyes scrunched in a painful grimace, her mind undoubtedly feeling history repeating itself.

"There, that oughta appease my Lord in the event of your untimely..." The man was running his wand along her wound, a black light radiating as her flesh sealed beneath it. "Well...end anyway..."

Blinded by rain, Harry's eyes went white with anger.

"You won't lay a finger on her."

In the shadows the man smiled, "It seems I've already lain several."

As he stood there, the running mud curling around his feet, he felt sick. He was cornered, for if he acted brusquely Kaylens was dead. And if he failed to act, they could both meet the same fate.

His hardened eyes narrowed, chest rising with stressful exertion, as the vile man continued speaking.

"All the Dark Lord wants is the prophecy Potter, yet if you continue this stubborn refusal that little mudblooded friend of yours will wind up dead." The man grinned evilly, "And we all know you don't want that to happen."

His wand shook, so hard was his grip upon it.

"Just think...what has your stubborn refusal gotten you thus far? Certainly it did wonders for improving that blood traitor Black's current state howeve..."

"Sirius was a good man," He heard himself hissing.

The man merely inclined an eyebrow. "Ah yes, I seem to remember him fancying himself as such even during our school years. He, the noble Black, always criticizing Broussard and I...the two Detreck brothers were worthless to him, even the one from his own House..."

Harry felt unwell, anger and hate vibrating unceremoniously within.

"Your father was much the same...both never sparing even a thought for the noble Black's own kin..." He continued, the same tone of superiority dripping from his words. "Sirius always wondered what

finally sent Regulus to the ranks of the Death Eaters. Would you like me to tell you?"

Kaylens attempted to twist away, the massive man easily batting her attempt aside.

"The deciding factor you see, was Sirius' stubborn refusal to acknowledge his brother as an equal," He revealed. "The arrogant fool followed those resisting the Dark Lord blindly, never stopping to consider who was really in the right. He and the rest of those Gryffindor fools following Dumbledore never even understood our reasons..."

"Oh?" Harry shot out, "And how are we justifying cold-blooded murder these days?"

The man's teeth glinted in the firelight. "There's no need to justify anything, because the war hungry Muggles will not be content to leave our kind alone forever. It's kill or be killed Potter. The Dark Lord is simply acting preemptively, before those filthy Muggles get the chance."

"And what of the anti-Muggle wards?" Harry asked scathingly, thinking quickly. "If you're really as superior to them as you'd like to believe, then all of your 'pureblood' magic ought to prevent that, wouldn't you think?"

The Death Eater Detreck laughed. He actually laughed.

"Tell me Potter, with all of the inter-marrying between Wizards and Muggles, how would you propose keeping our world forever hidden? Eventually we will become exposed, and when that happens the Muggles will recognize the potential threat we hold."

Inching towards the heat of the fire, and its veil of smoke, Harry allowed him to talk, wracking his mind for a plan.

"Once that happens I'm quite sure they will be keen in showing us mercy. Perhaps the same kind that was given to the Jews of their second World War, or that which was shown to the indigenous people

of the Americas when the new lands were discovered. Or to the witches of Salem..."

Kaylens cut him off.

"You can't possibly believe every Muggle is like tha..."

A dagger was thrust to her throat, silencing her words as blood prickled her skin. A sadistic look of calm crossed the eldest Detreck's face as he held it there.

"You see Harry, Muggles are unlike us," Continued the monster. "They have yet to conquer their animalistic natures, and for that they must be silenced, before they can silence us."

"And all of this entails killing Muggleborns how?" Harry pointed out, desperate to keep the man talking.

"Every war has casualties Potter, and in this one anyone sympathetic to those primitive creatures runs the risk of becoming one."

"They're not primitive..."

"Yet they wage war upon other countries, killing their own kind without thought, acti..."

"Since Death Eaters do the same thing I guess you would know."

"Our killing is at least educated, and justified by more than wars over boundaries."

Harry's voice shook with suppressed rage. "Nothing can justify cold blooded murder..."

"You would know then," Hissed the man, sneering spitefully. "After all, once a killer, always a killer, or am I wrong on that Potter?"

He remained silent, watching as Detreck slowly lowered his blade from her throat.

"Despite what you think, you are very much alike us Potter, and thus my Lord has a proposal of sorts for you."

Watching the tension leave Kalliandra's neck, her face slumping gratefully forward without fear of impalement upon the knife's blade, he grunted. "So what deal is it this time? Join him and he spares my life?"

"No, simply reveal the missing part of the prophecy in exchange for your friend's family's lives."

"And Hermione?"

The man's eyes glittered evilly, acrid smoke billowing out with a change of the winds.

"In the Department of Mysteries, in the Hall of Prophecies, you remember the shelves upon shelves filled with the foretellings of seers past?"

"Yes."

"Then surely you were not arrogant enough to believe that yours was the only foretold regarding this war."

His shoulders stiffened, for he actually had.

From the forest's edge, scant meters away, resounded the cracking of a tree limb as it finally burnt away. It fell into the burning underbrush, sending a flash of fire bulging outwards on impact.

In the cacophonous roar of heat and flame all parties scattered, the smoke clearing in time for Harry to see Kaylens still in the villain's vice grip, her apparent bolt for freedom hindered by the man's muscular arm which had tightened around her.

Her elbow to his torso went ignored, the massive man's muscles protecting him. Detreck merely grunted, hauling her to her feet as the smoke dispersed, the rain beginning to smother the flames.

"We waste time. In the hall of prophecies there is another with your name on it, or did that decrepit old man fail to inform of you of its existence as well?"

Somehow he managed to avoid snapping his wand, despite the shaking of his fists.

"When you find that, and divulge its contents, only then will our Lord release your precious Mudblooded friend."

"You're lying," Harry spat, the acrid taste of smoke on his tongue. "If I told you, he'd kill her anyway."

The man's lips curled. "Perhaps...but if you had something else to offer him, something in addition to that...something he very much desired...than perhaps once you'd revealed the second prophecy, he'd return her if your word was given to reveal another once the exchange was made."

Harry shook his head disbelievingly, "Since when has ole Riddle trusted my word?"

"How dare you defile his name..."

Harry nearly laughed, "Defile? Just so you know, as someone well acquainted with his Muggle father's headstone, I can assure you that is indeed his name."

Kalliandra's head was suddenly yanked violently back, the wand again to her throat. All thoughts of traumatizing the Death Eater with mockery of its leader flew from his mind, his eyes glued to her pale, soaked face.

"What else does he want to know?"

The eldest Detreck leered triumphantly, "When you find the prophecy regarding 'the daughter of a man of power upon Gaelic soil' you will have what he is looking for. There is no name attached, therefore it may be seized by anyone."

Through the wind Harry's yell seemed almost faint. "And if I don't find it?"

"Then that Mudblood of yours dies. Unless you find something better to offer."

With icy certainty Harry realized that the conversation was nearly over, Kaylens' fate hanging in the balance.

"You see boy, you may have defied our Lord thus far, but you can't forever. In the end he wins, you lose, and if Dumbledore's ill-thought resistance continues..."

A prod in the shoulder sent Kaylens stumbling forward, her hands suddenly bound.

"Then all these spares will meet the same fate as those noble parents of yours."

Kalliandra's eyes flew up, surprise flitting through them even in the darkness. He met them, painfully holding onto them, grasping for seconds through the downpour so she could see how sorry he was, for the past, for where his short sightedness had landed them, and still...for what he may have to do.

There was simply no time left.

Somehow, the concern swimming within her golden orbs conveyed what he needed to know.

She understood.

His jaw set determinedly, he re-aimed his wand.

"Stupefy..."

Kalliandra went crumbling to the ground, her limp form lying in a single mud-sodden heap, the Death Eater's face twisting in surprise as another stunner flew from Harry's wand.

He had done the one thing Detreck could not have counted on. Injuring a comrade, thereby removing her from harms way while simultaneously clearing the path to the enemy.

His stunner struck the enemy directly in the chest, a second before a cruel voice resounded behind him.

"Crucio."

Harry fell hard, his body imprinting the soft ground as a thousand white hot knives sliced slowly, then brutally at his flesh. His vision was blinded, by mud, rain, and pain, yet he still saw the hairy man, half-way through the werewolf transformation, walking around him, reviving Detreck...

The werewolf Kaylens had taken out had awoken.

As he screamed, convulsing in pain, rolling in the slick stream that had become the clearing's grounds, he heard their arguing voices.

"...belongs to the Dark Lords, not us...we can't harm him...leave it to him...dealt with in due time...orders were...deliver message...leave them..."

The never-ending agony suddenly lifted, his tortured nerves still spasming as he somehow rolled to face them. His hand flopped around pathetically, fingers closing without strength upon thin air, searching for the familiar holly wood he had lost a hold of during his convulsions.

"You can waste time chasing after us, or her Potter. Think about it."

The wet air resonated with the sharp cracks of disappearance, his muscular synapses finally firing at his command. With soreness outshining the most grueling trials of human endurance he thrust himself up, his hands sinking into the muddy dirt, eyes frantically scanning the clearing.

Kaylens was nowhere to be seen.

Heart lurching sickeningly, he stumbled to his feet. Sliding, staggering, he peered through the darkness, summoning his wand from where it had sunk beneath the uprooted grass.

Lightning flashed, casting an eerie glow across the water.

Kaylens lay facedown, floating within it.

His feet moved, faster than he would have thought possible, plunging into the chest deep water. Quickly he propelled himself to where she lay submerged, floating just below the surface. Only her bound wrists, pushed upwards by the gentle water's lapping, remained emerged in the air, her hair fanning out behind her head

His arms quickly sought her, wrapping around her shoulders to pull her out, letting her dead weight fall hard against him.

His hand fell to her chest, his spoken words a whisper against the storm.

"Ennervate..."

The warmth spread from between his fingers, his unconsciously done magic triggering no reaction in her.

The spell was removed, yet she remained unresponsive. He had expected coughing, shouting, something.

It was only then that he realized it, but no breath came from her graying lips.

Defense lessons had taught him about more than countering spells, and he was already turning her limp form to face him, using the water's buoyancy to cradle her as her face lolled back.

His numbing, pained fingers quickly wiped the plastered hair from her lips, a sick feeling rising in his chest as his eyes flickered across the vacant grounds.

The Death Eaters were gone...they would not come back.

Heart wrenching, he acted, pressing his mouth against hers as he pushed precious oxygen in, breathing for her, listening to the odd hiss of his breath making its way through her air passages.

Pulling away, waiting for the rise of her chest against his, he felt nothing.

Panicked eyes flickered over her peaceful face before his mouth once again descended, capturing her icy lips with his own in another breath of desperation. One arm was tightening around her, the other cradling her head as he pinched her nose.

Again he waited.

The rise in her chest as he had breathed had been barely discernable, and now there was nothing. A single thought flitted through his frightened mind. He was doing this wrong.

In that single moment of paralyzing horror he suddenly understood. Her air passage was clogged.

He had to clear it.

He was already turning her limp form around, allowing her back to fall against him as his fists sought her midsection. With a single, powerful drive he thrust them in and upwards, feeling her body spasm in a small shudder.

Again he repeated the motion, thrusting forcefully. Her limp form seized violently in response, her upper body falling forward as a racking cough shook her, the water expelling from her lungs. Harry lunged forward with her, arms wrapping around her chest, preventing her face from again hitting the traitorous water.

His forearms strained against her as she convulsed, choking on the wind, gasping as cough after shuddering cough shook her thin frame. Shivering in the frigid water his pounding heart calmed until she leaned loosely forward, gasping breathlessly.

Without a word he pulled her against him, clutching her quivering form flush to his own, her head falling against his shoulder. Her shallow panting caressed his skin, the rising of her chest against his reassuring him in an inexplicable way.

Slowly he fought to control the hitching of his own fast drawn breaths, for after everything he felt ready to crumble, only he suddenly found himself the pillar to which she clung.

Resting his chin atop her head, peering into the night, he silently prayed that what he had overheard was accurate. For if he was really considered Voldemort's toy, needed to perform a task, then he truly was untouchable.

In theory they would again be safe, until Riddle decided to again 'chat.'

As of now, if he were wrong, then their only refuge would be the water they stood shivering within, and he had yet to properly master the bubble-head charm for hiding beneath its murky depths. Now their only true protection lay within the veil of cat-tails rising high above the shimmering water's surface, obscuring them from all.

Icy wind howled, sending the reeds around them dancing.

Breathing unsteadily, the scent of burnt wood filled his nostrils. The storm was slowly winning the battle against the blaze, extinguishing the aflame underbrush and trees, and the light of the fire was slowly dying. Tilting his face he watched the fiery orange glow reflecting from her wet cheeks, lending some warmth to her pale hue.

"Are you alright?" He finally whispered, his shivering hands smoothing her tangled, sopping hair from her face. She simply breathed against him, hair dripping across his shoulders, her entire form quivering.

Tightening his arms around her, he again whispered his query, his questioning lips brushing along her earlobe. "Kaylens?" He murmured shakily, breathing against her hair. "You okay?"

In his arms she nodded imperceptively, his trepidation for her alone sending his heart thundering. His relief was palpable, as was the feel of her beneath his hands.

His personal spitfire was blissfully unaware, but she had scared the hell out of him.

Raindrops continued falling, heavy and strong, splattering against the water with hypnotic melody. Somehow, without reason, his knuckles were rising, tracing alone her jaw line, a drowsy murmur leaving her pale, cracked lips at his touch.

Instinctively his strong arms began enveloping her ever tighter, pressing her to him needingly, his reasons elusive. Surprisingly her delicate hands were responding, rising along his chest, gentle fingertips brushing the bare skin of his pectorals where his sweater hung tattered and loose, courtesy of the werewolves' claws and the forest's snaring bramble.

Beneath the rippling water a gentle tingling was radiating onto him, traveling where her cool skin fell into contact with his own, as if tiny bits of static electricity were passing between them.

Somehow he understood, for he was feeling her true magic. Her telling signature trailing across him in a maddening way, just below the surface, veiled from his eyes.

Yet somehow, he could not look away.

Slowly, surely, the maddening sensation of her fingers tangling within his jumper drove the unconscious concerns from his mind, his bright eyes finally falling shut to the night, hiding beneath the dark, matted hair slung dripping across his scarred brow.

Upon his neck he felt her lips parting, an exhausted sigh escaping against his skin. His face dipped in response, burrowing within her rain scented hair.

"You know..." He disclosed softly, shivering in the wind. "You may be more trouble than you're worth."

A soft laugh, scarcely there, sent his skin tingling.

"Oh?" She breathed, her hoarsely spoken words tinged with amusement. "And you're not?"

"Point take," He conceded, a low laugh vibrating his throat.

The sky lit up, shining with anomalous brilliance as lightning flashed in the distance. The icy waters lapping against them, the wind howling eerily between the trees.

"Potter..." She mumbled, his hand rising to fall upon the smooth skin of her neck at the sound. "What happened?"

Her voice was barely a whisper, trailing away as his fingers went trailing down the smooth skin of her neck, feeling her pulse beating with regularity beneath them.

"Apparently," He murmured gruffly, her light breathing a feather tracing across his skin, "I can't leave you alone for a minute."

"I could say the same for you," She said breathlessly, shivering as his hands rose along the contours of her form. First gripping her waist, rising along her sides, sliding to caress the skin beneath her breasts, covering her ribcage.

His breath hitched with hers, her arms rising to encircle his neck, cupping the back of his head. Quickly her hands were becoming lost within his untamable hair, the same unruliness that he had so oft heard her criticize, yet now felt her reveling in.

The earthy scent of mingled mud and rain was somehow intoxicating upon her, drawing him in more than he could allow, more than he should allow. Yet he was, his lips already lowering to hers, the thickly strung tension of a thousand harsh exchanges vibrating between the two as his mouth fell upon hers, capturing her lips as he had when pulling her limply from the icy water. Only now her mouth was moving

against his, the taste of salty sweat lingering upon his tongue. Her taste was mingling with the refreshing rain pouring upon them, cascading down their faces.

His clothing clung wetly to him as his hands sought out her tangled hair. He frenziedly felt her deepening the contact of their lips, the rough stubble of his chin scratching her in the process. A slight grumble sent his own lips trembling against hers with laughter, her hands squeezing his shoulders in retaliatory fashion. His own mouth was parting again, gasping, never relaxing the pressure against her lips as he fought for breath against her, feeling her doing the same.

A second later he again seized her, his lower lip being tugged gently between her own, an odd growl coming unbidden from his throat. For a tempestuous moment she quivered with seeming amusement before his agile hands responded, running along her neck's vertebrae, a startled whimper falling from her lithe lips.

"Kaylens..." He murmured, his arms desperately gathering her against him, his mouth deliriously relishing her taste. Suddenly he was ignorant of the rain pouring around them, aware only of her hands wicked onslaught as they slipped beneath his shirt's collar, sliding along the bare skin of his shoulders, caressing his back. His hair dripped into his face, and with rushed breaths their ill-concealed passions radiated, their mouths moving in a stormy fervor. Within his arms was the girl Harry had feared to have lost before he had known what it was to have, and he had no plans of letting go.

Slowly, panting breathlessly, Kalliandra pulled away. Her fingers still clung to him, the rain pouring freely upon her flushing skin. Water droplets were dampening her brow, and her fingers slipped out from beneath his shirt to linger upon his collarbone. Unable to let her leave he leaned his brow against hers, cupping her face in his hands, feeling her eyelashes fluttering open against his cheeks.

His own jade eyes flickered hazily open, meeting the deep hazel ones regarding him. She was blinking against the rain, her confused eyes revealing her barely concealed emotion.

Breathing heavily he leaned forward, brushing his mouth against hers, kissing her slowly. He was taking his time now...without the rush, without the desperation, without the fear of having nearly lost her. Thumbs running along her high cheekbones, carefully wiping the mud from her face, his lips moved needingly across hers.

Again they parted, her mouth moving in a soft, disbelieving whisper.

"You've lost your mind..."

"I know," He murmured, pressing his mouth to hers chastely. "You won't tell anyone will you?"

She smiled against his lips, shaking her head slowly. "No..." She whispered, amusement tingeing her intonations. "This won't leave the clearing."

"Good," He quipped, smiling deviantly. "I would have hated to Obliviate you."

"What makes you think I would have minded?"

Burying his lips near her ear, he emitted a low growl, "You would have."

"Hmph."

Combing his fingers through her thick, mud-laden hair, he felt her slender form again began to shiver, her quivering more pronounced than before.

Wrapping his arms tighter around her form, he murmured his curiosity. "Does this mean you've forgiven me for stunning you?"

She grumbled indecipherably for a moment, before suddenly growing tense, her face swiveling towards the visible clearing, eyes flickering with sudden recollection.

"Harry..." She whispered seriously, all lightness gone from her voice. "What happened to the Death Eater..."

"Gone," He assured softly, "They're gone. They won't be back. Minus the dead one."

Her eyes remained averted, warily gazing through the rain into the darkness of night.

"How can you be sure?"

He smiled sadly, the warmth within him slowly dissipating as his war filled experiences, the ones that had taught him the rules of engagement, flew through his mind.

"Because..." He whispered hauntingly, "They delivered their message. They had their fun. For them that was enough, for the time being."

"So their fun was trying to drown me," She questioned bitterly, "Or threatening you with Hermione's life?"

"Both."

Her eyes flickered across his, her expression sending something wrenching inside.

"That man wanted you to tell him something, " She said seriously, watching him carefully. "Yet you wouldn't. Why?"

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple rising strongly within his throat. "Because I'd rather die than allow them the information they need."

"Than what stopped them from forcing you to go with them?"

His hand rose, trailing across her cheek, her breath faltering at his touch. Without reason his brow was again pressed against hers, her face so close that he could see the brown flecks within her irises dancing with each flash of lightning.

"Even if they had," He whispered sullenly, "Even if they had tortured Hermione right in front of me, I still would never tell. Because the second I did we would have all been dead."

Distant thunder shook the sky, Kalliandra's eyes falling shut against the wet onslaught. His remained upon her, never leaving as her chest rose and fell against his. The gentle rhythm of her breathing was inexplicably calming.

"If the man is so ruthless..." She finally spoke, "Why would he offer you the choices he did?"

"Because as ruthless as he is, he's also intelligent. Voldemort knows his only chance in hell of getting anything out of me would be by offering an exchange: Hermione for the information, at a neutral location." He paused, breathing heavily, watching the stirring across her countenance.

"It's the only way I could ensure her safety," He finished solemnly.

Against his forehead he felt a light frown creasing her brow. A moment later her veiled eyes fell open, observing him guardedly.

"How could Voldemort possibly know what you're thinking?"

His fingers clenched and unclenched around her arms in a tense rhythm. "Because Kalliandra, Voldemort and I have been playing this game for a long time. And were both getting better at it."

Her mouth parted questioningly, his fingers rising to press carefully against them, silencing her queries.

"Please, don't ask. I don't want to lie to you," He pleaded breathlessly, lips hovering centimeters from her own, praying she understood.

She did.

Against him she nodded, wet droplets cascading down her paling face. This time it was she who sealed the scant space between them, her slick arms winding around his neck, her body pressing flush against his.

For some reason, as her parted lips allowed his tongue entry, he suddenly felt more afraid than he ever had.

The stakes had been raised that day, for with his best friend gone he suddenly had so much to lose, and it was the girl he remained intertwined with that had sent fissures running through his heavily erected walls.

Pulling away, gasping fervently, he suddenly was unsure of whether to hate her or love her for that.

"You're infuriating..." He murmured, nose nuzzling her cheek.

"Likewise," She gasped breathlessly, water-laden strands of hair falling over her eyes

They simply remained, hovering within the embrace of the other, until a flash of red crossed the night, circling to rest upon the pond's edge.

Whilst she stiffened, Harry almost laughed in relief.

The fiery phoenix was watching them silently, something suspiciously like an old rag dropped near its feet, its feathery head cocked at a peculiar angle.

If Harry had not known better, he would say Fawkes looked amused.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who let me know that my viewpoint markers, which had previously been astericks, were not showing up. I truly appreciated it:)

"Hope is the companion of power, and mother of success; for who so hopes strongly has within him the gift of miracles."
Samuel Smiles

Chapter 27 The Companion of Grief

Near dawn she found him there. He was still awake, as she had known he would be.

Dean was flat on his back, staring at the rich, blood red canopy of his bed. His eyes had not moved from the canopy in hours, for fear of seeing the empty bed besides him, and they did not move as his bed hangings stirred in the eerie light.

Ginny slipped between them, crawling across the covers until she lay besides him. Wordlessly he had wound his arms around her small frame, an icy pain twisting within him. It was a heavy guilt, for he had his friend's warm comfort while her boyfriend had naught to see save for the cold white sheet draped over his closed eyes.

Seamus was gone, and it felt like a dagger had been driven through him.

It dawned a dark, gray-red dawn, and the sinister rain outside continued, pooling upon the window sills. He could not close the windows, nor block out the chilled wind, for when he had first seen Seamus' empty bed that night he had thrown open each pane, tearing the wooden panels from their hinges.

Now the water dripped onto the floor, the irregular rhythm serving to drive him closer and closer to the breaking point. It was a sound Neville seemed oblivious to, for his dorm mate's steady snores filled the air, and with each passing sound Dean felt the urge to smash something violently.

His fingers twisted in Ginny's red hair, reminding him of her presence. Though Seamus was gone, she was still there.

He had a reason to remain strong.

Still he did not look at her. Gradually her quiet breaths became regular, but his dark eyes remained open, staring at the canopy.

It was all he could do.

Harry watched as Angelina ran from the room, unable to shake the icy sensation slithering within him. He knew he should not care, he could not...

Yet he did.

Seconds after port-keying to Lupin's manor, as he had regained his footing in the candlelit foyer, Kalliandra had lost consciousness. His shivering body had clutched her against his chest, and that was how Angelina had found them.

It was becoming clearer, the harshly exchanged words between Kaylens and the headmaster...the ones he had overheard in the hospital wing... It seemed ages ago, yet they echoed hauntingly fresh within his head.

"Considering that I'm the one you can't cure..."

"Kalliandra, looking at it as a death sentence will not help matters."

"You're right. Nothing will."

Angelina had claimed that the physical stresses of the night had just finally taken their toll, saying how magical travel was often too much for a weakened body to take. She had told him everything was going to be fine, to not worry...

Her eyes betrayed her words for the lies they were.

"Harry, set her there. Help me get her sleeves..."

Angelina was back, having returned with a hoard of supplies. He did as he was told, laying Kalliandra on the faded couch. She sunk into

the torn up cushions, stuffing bulging out at the additional weight. It appeared to be the only real piece of furniture on the first floor, and he too squeezed onto it.

He couldn't leave her.

Reaching down he grasped the cuff of her wet sleeve, rolling it up. With every inch of exposed flesh another bruise was revealed, his insides twisting at the thick, deep purple marks lining her delicate skin. In the dark of the clearing he had not even noticed...

Angelina knelt besides them, her hands moving methodically, with the calculated movements born of her healer training. His former teammate was now cleaning the inside of Kalliandra's elbow, inserting a small needle into the bluish line of her vein. He could only watch from where he sat on Lupin's worn couch, holding Kaylens messy head of hair in his lap.

"Harry hold this...hold it high..."

He nodded mutely, taking the clear plastic bag from her, watching the yellowish-brown fluid sloshing within it. Following Angelina's instructions he held it shoulder high, unable to remove his eyes from Kaylens' serene face. Her deep hazel eyes were now hidden behind pale eyelids, her face in desperate need of washing. A streak of mud still highlighted her cheekbone, a gray coat of ashes lending her a ghostly, freckled appearance.

Reaching down Harry brushed her hair aside, revealing a dried smear of blood hiding near her hairline.

A deep bruise was forming there as well.

In fluid motions his former housemate attached a long, clear tube to the IV in her arm with a quiet click, retrieving the fluid filled bag from him. With both of his hands finally free he found himself smoothing the hair away from her face, wiping the mud away with his thumbs.

He could feel Angelina's eyes on him. "She needs to rest Harry."

He did not answer right away, contenting himself to watch as Angelina wove her wand, the IV bag rising to remain suspended in mid-air. Slowly the liquid began dripping from the bag into a small, tube-like chamber.

Swallowing hard, his gaze rose pointedly to Angelina's.

"What are you giving her?"

Angelina never ceased working, and she was already shooing Harry's hands out of the way as she carefully grasped Kalliandra's other limp arm, tapping just above the elbow with her wand.

Kaylens' blue vein bulged just long enough for another syringe needle to be inserted, only this time Angelina was drawing blood samples, rather than starting a drip infusion.

"Angelina?" He prompted gruffly.

The young healer sighed wearily, "It's a mixture of red blood cells and platelets Harry." She pulled back on the syringe, and it began filling with a viscous, dark red blood.

Harry hastily looked away.

"Why does she need that?" He ground out, his voice hoarse with exhaustion.

Leaving the needle in her arm Angelina unscrewed the full syringe barrel, setting the blood sample upon a floating tray she had conjured. She made quick work of attaching a new, empty one to the needle as she repeated the process.

"How about you Harry?" Angelina asked dismissively. "Knowing you, you've probably managed to bang yourself up good."

"Don't change the subject."

Angelina's dark eyes darted up, "I'm not. But I'm a healer, that's why Dumbledore left me to wait for you two. I just had to check."

His tired eyes turned to his own hands. He flipped them over, observing his healed, calloused palms. The deep slashes the broken glass had left were gone. Fawkes' tears had healed them, dripping into his wounds when he had reached through the thick rain to take the port key.

Before he even had a chance to wonder why Fawkes had bothered healing such minor injuries, the phoenix had flown away.

"I'm fine," He replied staidly, realizing he meant it. No longer could he feel the stinging scratches, torn by the werewolf's claws, down his back. Even the bone deep chill the icy rain had left was gone.

All that was left was the sick sensation churning within his stomach, his only relief the girl in his lap, who was incapable of responding enough to ease his fears.

"What's wrong with her?"

In the empty, windowless room, Angelina removed the needle from her arm.

"Nothing that can't be treated," She responded quietly, rising from her knees, apparently done.

"That's not what I asked."

He did not miss the way her eyes avoided his.

"Nothing that I can tell you. For what it's worth...I'm sorry about that Harry."

He swallowed, the sound seeming much louder in the still air. He bowed his head, spying a spot of gray ash near the corner of Kalliandra's mouth. Without thought his thumb wiped it away, his stiff demeanor relaxing as a sleepy murmur emerged from her cold lips.

Angelina watched it all, silently placing each of the blood samples into a cool carrying case. For a moment her clinical nature vanished, a sad look overcoming her ebony features.

It was then that it all came together for Harry. Every little detail that she had let slip, every sign of fatigue, every word the Death Eaters had said...

"It has to do with what she is, doesn't it?"

Though he had asked, there was no question in his tone.

Angelina rose a skeptical eyebrow, "Then you do know?"

His eyes rose to hers, "Yes. That's why you couldn't tell me. Dumbledore isn't aware I know."

She sighed tiredly, but he was already continuing. "Ron and the others, you said they're fine and that they were taken to Hogwarts."

She just nodded, earning a hard look from him.

"Then why were we brought here?"

"I wish I knew. All I know is that the Order is finally utilizing the safe houses it's been setting up."

His brow crinkled, his hands unconsciously caressing Kalliandra's damp hair, which was strewn across his lap, leaving wet marks upon his trousers. "There are other places besides headquarters?"

"Of course. Don't ask where, because I don't know."

His smile was strained, "Clever really...not letting any one person know too much about anything in case they're caught."

"Exactly."

His lapse from the dark topic plaguing him could continue no longer, for the feeling of carefully controlled panic was rising.

Indicating the IV bag, he shot out a question. "Why does she need that?"

"Perhaps I'm not the best person to explain that."

"You're a healer," He said in a carefully controlled tone. "Who better?"

Angelina opened her mouth, as if to respond, but she never got the chance.

"Perhaps I can. If you would only allow me."

Harry's head spun, as did Angelina's. Neither had heard the person's arrival, and his heart was thundering at the fatalistic possibilities that could have resulted from such a lapse on their parts.

His eyes narrowed, anger mixing with relief as he saw another loved one intact and standing in the hall's doorframe. A bitter laugh broke his throat, and he gestured into the room.

"By all means Professor, it is your house after all."

Professor Lupin stepped wearily into the room, looking worse for the wear. But then again, Harry reflected, didn't they all? The thought nearly sent Harry laughing. Instead he bit it back, another bitter sound growling deep in his throat.

From the look on Lupin's face, Harry knew he had noticed. The deep lines on the man's face betrayed an inner pain, one Harry felt all too acutely.

It was the pain of loss. Only Harry knew Lupin had lost far more than he ever had. Of course, he was still young. There was time to catch up in that category.

As if sensing his dark thoughts, Kalliandra stirred. His attention was suddenly riveted to her, his hand on her cheek. Half of him hoped desperately for her to awaken, while another part feared that his one chance of discovering what ailed her would then slip away.

She was far too stubborn to burden anyone else with her pain. He knew that now.

It was startling how much could change in less than twenty four hours.

Harry's half angry, half questioning gaze finally rose. He was startled to discover Angelina's absence. Somehow she had slipped away unnoticed, leaving he and Lupin alone.

After having been ignored by him for over two weeks, he wasn't sure if he was happy about that or not.

"It's good to see you Harry."

"Is it?" He couldn't help it, but his voice was cold.

Lupin looked stung. "Of course it is."

"Well forgive me for being skeptical," Harry replied sarcastically. "It's not like you haven't spoken to me in awhile."

"I had my reasons."

He inclined an eyebrow, "You had reasons for believing Sirius all-but-killed my mum and dad too."

"That's below the belt Harry."

"Good."

Remus ran a weary hand through his graying hair, leaning back against the wall. For the longest time neither spoke, the entire meeting arousing conflicting emotions within Harry.

He wanted to slug him. For what he had done to him, to Tonks, to Kaylens...by ignoring them simply to shelter them from his canine side. For having left him to deal with the pain of Sirius' death alone. For having had the audacity to walk in, saying hello, as if nothing

were amiss between the two. For having sent not one owl that summer.

All of Harry's pent up frustrations with Lupin were finally bubbling over, conveyed in the single icy look he shot him.

Outside the cold, first of November wind rattled the sidings. The weather matched his black mood perfectly.

"I'm sorry Harry."

He nearly laughed. "Are you?"

"For everything," Lupin whispered chokingly.

Harry looked up, meeting the pleading stare of his father's last living friend. Suddenly he did not see the man who had inspired such a feeling of abandonment.

Instead...he saw his family.

He swallowed hard, remembering the rifts he and Ron had been through, and the one they were in now. All those years ago, when he and Ron had fought during the Tri-Wizard tournament, Hermione had called them stupid.

She had been right.

Life was too short to hold grudges.

The reminder of Hermione's plight, and the thought that Remus could be taken just as easily, sent him stumbling for words. "Just..." He started, forcing a strained smile. "Don't let it happen again."

"I won't."

Remus' light brown eyes were nothing but honest. Suddenly, despite his lingering fears for Hermione...for Ron...for Ginny...for Dean...for Tonks...for Dumbledore...for Remus...for Neville...for Luna...for Kalliandra...

It was all too much to take, but suddenly he felt that he may not be quite so desperately alone in facing all of it.

"Thank you," He said quietly, truly meaning it.

Remus simply smiled sadly, inclining his head towards the slumbering girl in his lap.

"How is she?"

Harry felt his brow instinctively furrow, his brain once again compartmentalizing what he could worry about, and impact, in the here and now.

"I'm not sure," He replied honestly. "But Profes...Remus, what's happening to her?"

The startled look upon Remus's face faded, his kind eyes regarding him carefully.

"I assume you already know then."

"Yes," He heard himself whispering, his voice filled with naked concern.

Remus studied him for a long moment, his eyes falling on the movement of Harry's hands as he stroked Kalliandra's long hair.

For some reason Harry did not care if Remus noticed.

The former professor's brow crinkled with both curiosity and pity at the connotations Harry's gestures conveyed. "Are you sure you really want to know Harry? Sometimes not knowing is best, for when you know..." Remus' gaze was suddenly far off, as if peering into the distant past.

"Sometimes Harry, the truth will simply haunt you."

Harry's throat constricted, the tears glistening within Remus' eyes far too clear.

"What if it already does?"

The elder man smiled sadly, "Then I'd say things between the two of you have changed. After all, she's out cold and you have yet to try and throttle her."

A sad laugh bubbled out of him, his gaze falling to rest on her pale forehead.

"Please...I...don't say anything..."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Harry found himself nodding with no particular reason. "Good...I...I've no idea..."

"What's going on?" Remus finished.

Harry spotted the man's knowing smile, and was finally able to let out the breath he had been unconsciously holding.

"Something like that."

In the still air of the windowless room, both men remained silent. Harry's eyes fell closed, his ears seeking out the soft sound of Kaylens' regular breathing.

Somehow, even with the growing uneasiness within, this calmed him.

With a decisiveness he did not feel, he finally spoke.

"I need to know Remus."

A loud sigh filled the room. "I was afraid of that."

And Remus explained. He explained how magical beings had come into creation, for somewhere in human history, human blood cells had begun mutating.

Most of the mutations had resulted in cancerous blood streams, killing those in possession of those variations. Muggles and Wizards alike still struggled against those diseases, leukemia the most prominent, but there were some individuals where the mutations became beneficial.

He explained how everything, both living and inert, contained a form of energy. Not all of it was measurable in the Muggle fashion, and it was this form of energy, the kind that would fail to register on electrical scales, that allowed magical beings to flourish.

It was magical energy, and over time some individuals developed the ability to manipulate it, without adverse affects.

Others were not so lucky.

There were people like Kalliandra, people like Reaches, who could delve into the magical realm. But doing so was dangerous.

In the case of witches and wizards, they developed completely new cells in their blood streams, and magical energy was conducted through their physical bodies via these. Thus their bodies were able to act like electrical circuits, and energy was able to pass through their magical cells without ever touching their other cells.

It was a perfect system.

There were occasions when witches and wizards would become fatigued, and such occurrences usually happened when the person was performing wandless magic, or a particularly complicated spell. And the reason for their exhaustion was quite simple really:

When one's body functions like a circuit, if excess magical energy is taken in and not released in the form of a properly cast spell, then that energy remains stuck in the body and has to go somewhere. And since magic runs quite literally through one's veins, that witch or

wizard's magical cells would be the first to be essentially, electrocuted by their magical overload.

Fortunately magical cells are quite robust, and their plasma membranes are more than capable of absorbing such overloads.

Red blood cells, however, are not.

On occasion so much energy is not released from a wizard's body that it bursts through their magical cells, frying blood cells essential in the sustenance of life.

And when one's red blood cells are dying it is hard to circulate enough oxygen.

It was how Luna Lovegood's mother had died. She had suffocated, while still breathing.

Such deaths were a rare occurrence, because human blood contains far more cells than necessary for the sustenance of life. So when some blood cells are killed there are generally enough survivors to allow that individual to continue functioning in a normal, albeit fatigued, manner.

The first time Harry had tried the Patronus Charm he had overdrawn as well. He had been left winded, gasping for breath, just like he was after every Quidditch practice.

Yet he had partaken in no physical activity.

It was because he had lost red-blood cells, the very cells responsible for carrying Oxygen throughout the body, and his body was responding as it would in an Oxygen-deprived manner.

Reaches had never evolved that far. They had never developed additional cells in their blood stream, and the mutation allowing them to conduct electrical current lay directly upon their red blood cells.

If they overdrew, their first cells to be damaged would be the one's necessary in the transportation of Oxygen.

Their mutation was one that worked, but it functioned poorly. Wizards had evolved much more gracefully, for their additional cells provided a barrier to protect them against overdrawing. Ultimately it was this defense mechanism that had allowed the wizarding species to not only flourish, but to survive.

Unlike in him, the first cells to die in a Reach when they overdrew were their red blood cells.

For a Reach, the likelihood of suffering Luna's mother's fate was an almost certainty.

A cold feeling overtook Harry as all of this sunk in, for Kalliandra could easily die from overdrawing. She was only still alive due to the fact that her blood stream contained more red blood cells than it actually needed. Thus, she was capable of tolerating a certain degree of overdrawing, but the margin was slim.

For her, unlike a witch or wizard, there was no real learning curve. For her there was little room for mistake, for there were no cells to absorb the shock...

For her the only reward of overdrawing too much was death.

She would suffocate while still breathing.

It was why her red blood cells were being replaced even as Remus spoke. For every time she drew energy into herself she was slowly killing her cells.

Dumbledore was determined to replace as many as he could, as often as he could.

It was the only way to sustain her, to ensure her a longer life.

Suddenly he understood the intermittent bruising he had seen upon her throughout the year.

After Remus had turned...in the hospital wing...

Her platelets had been killed when she had overdrawn, to protect him from Remus...

She had passed out in Grimmauld place, from the effort...her body forcing her into unconsciousness in a last ditch effort to prevent her from doing further damage to herself..

The image of her lying unconscious on the floor of the Three Broomsticks flew through his mind.

He had known that she had risked exposure for what she was, but gods...She had risked death there, to protect people who hated her.

And he had once accused her of being a Death Eater.

Death Eaters knew no such selflessness.

A sickening sensation flooded over him, his hand rising to rifle through his still wet hair.

He scarcely heard Remus as he tried to lie, telling him it was not a death sentence for her.

Harry knew better, for what else could it be?

His grip on her tightened, as if holding onto her could prevent the inevitable. Remus was talking about treatment, about how if they maintained her blood count at proper levels that she would be able to live a normal, full life.

All it took was a single look into Remus' cheerless eyes to know that his friend did not truly believe what he was saying.

"Will she die?"

His own voice, his own question, sounded so far off.

"Harry nothing is certain...If she doesn't overdraw then we'll never have to worry about that possibility."

"Remus, will she die?" Harry felt his voice breaking, the familiar pang of loss welling within him.

As he met Remus' kind, glistening eyes, he knew the answer.

"Eventually..."

He wanted to croak out something, a form of protest that would quench the dryness of his throat, but nothing came.

"From what we know Harry, the others like her...eventually, they all overdrew."

Eventually...

The foolish recesses of his mind clung to that word, the ridiculous companion of grief stirring within him.

Hope.

It wasn't until sometime after dawn when he finally fell asleep. The IV was long since removed from her arm, her sleeping form pulled into his arms.

At the moment Harry didn't give a damn about who could see.

Author's Note:

Hey there folks! Alrighty, I've responded to the signed reviews already but wanted to touch upon the anonymous ones as well. :)

King of the damned: First, can I just say thank you so much for that last review! I was cracking up with laughter at your 'I rescind my comment' comment for a good five minutes so thank you for that! chuckles I actually agree with you though about the earlier chapters, because honestly I think that chapters 3-10 in particular could use a

lot of work. I sort of latched onto the 'nosy' side of Harry's personality that I've seen in the books, and wound up making him a bit Malfoy-esque there! I shall leave you with a clue though: I have a horrid tendency to throw in little subplots early on in a story, and the ones in this will come back to haunt the characters. Malfoy's behavior towards Kalliandra is one of those, because he definitely would not be acting friendly towards her without 'orders' of a sort.

Stu: Stu, thank you so much for your honesty. Not only is it refreshing but that really helps me to see what things are like from the readers POV. As for the loose ends, I definitely plan on tying them up. I tend to introduce lots of little subplots as clues as to what will come later on in the story, so all of those loose ends will eventually come back to 'haunt' the characters so to speak. -cackles- As for the united front, it occurs for two reasons: 1) Harry is not completely in his right mind due to the constant invasion of Voldemort within it. Every time Voldemort invades his mind he leaves a little bit more of his hostile nature, and that's why that comes out that way. I'm glad you pointed this out though because I can now go back, make some edits, and hopefully make the reason behind Harry's random outbursts seem a bit more clear. 2) Ron trusts Harry, and any conclusion that Harry would draw would hopefully be one that Ron would back up at first. Mainly I also did this to show how Ron at the beginning of the story fails to think for himself as much as he should, because I want to show his character progress as the story moves onward. As for the bickering...-grins guiltily- I tend to love reading bickering scenes so have inadvertently incorporated a few of my own. Most likely due to writing most of this during all nighters. ;)

Baka: LOL I'm glad you figured out the title meaning of Chapter 25. I like to make the chapters titles relevant in a bit of an elusive, clue-giving way.

Nitigia: Wow...Thank you so much for the wonderful compliment! I'm not sure this deserves that but I'm really glad that you are enjoying it so far!

Alex: Hey there! I'm glad that the Harry/OC pairing doesn't seem too out there. To be honest that's why I chose to write this pairing, because I haven't read many Harry/OC stories that I enjoyed, and

since it seemed like a hard pairing to write I thought it would be interesting to weave it into this story's plot line

Guest: I cannot thank you enough for having pointed that out! I had astericks as markers and since I posted this all at once, it never even occurred to me that they would be deleted by the system! I had no idea until I read the reviews that they had been and without them well...the scene transition would be insane to keep up with!

Andrew Spisak: Wow...how you were able to read this without the scene transition markers baffles me, but thank you so much for taking the time to let me know and for attempting to find them! lol Have a good one!

Vic: Thank you so much for the feedback on the style of writing. I do have a tendency to make stories a bit dark, I rather enjoy writing that way, but have been working on adding tension breakers as well. Lol

"Dangerous is wrath concealed."

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca -

Chapter 28 The Power of Anger

As if in a nightmare the room's impenetrable darkness was broken. From the darkened hall a single candle appeared, levitating ominously as it preceded its owner into the blackened room.

The house's lower story harboured neither windows nor doors to the outside world. It was a constant reminder of the monthly monster that had once been contained within its very walls, whenever the moon had cast its full light upon the earth.

Now another more dangerous monster loomed in the room's shadows.

With a casual wave of their hand the figure crossed the carpeted floor silently, their silhouette pausing above the slumbering teens. The figure knew that neither would awaken until their sleeping spell had run its course.

Yes, the figure was powerful. Their sleeping charms were one of their strongest talents.

They could operate in complete safety. None within the walls would be the wiser to their actions.

Tonight they would begin their plan.

A syringe was filled, its needle swiftly inserted into the slumbering girl's vein. Kaylens' pulsating blood, bluish in tint through her pale skin, flashed silver.

A moment later the strange hue faded, a grim line of satisfaction stretching over the figure's shadowed face.

With a sharp click the door to Dumbledore's office opened.

Tonks shot out of the armchair she had been dozing within, knowing the locking spell's removal to mean only one thing.

"He's back," She whispered. Lounging in the armchair besides her Regulus nodded.

Out in the hall, suddenly visible as the door opened, was Ron Weasley. He lay slumped besides his discarded crutch on the floor, sleeping soundly.

Crusantheus hung on the door miserably, his knocker curled and contorted around his ears so as to block out the sound of the young Gryffindor's snoring.

"Kill me..." He squeaked. "Please."

As tired as she was Tonks couldn't help but smile as Regulus lazily took aim, an evil glint in his eye.

"No!" Shrieked Crusantheus. "I didn't actually mean it!"

Regulus continued advancing on the cowering knocker until a deep voice intervened.

"No need to fret Crusantheus. Did you forget that the killing curse has no effect on brass knockers?"

Crusantheus peeked out from behind his knocker hopefully, as Tonks spun around, rounding on the infuriating thing's rescuer.

Somehow Ablus Dumbledore was standing behind her, looking rather jovial.

"Morning Nymphadora. Fancy a biscuit?"

As if on cue a tray of biscuits appeared in his outstretched palm.

Tonks blinked dazedly, rubbing her red rimmed eyes with her fists. Surely this jovial

man had not just returned from a meeting with the darkest of dark lords?

Regulus, completely unflummoxed by their sudden intrusion, rose from his arm chair to carefully inspect the food offering. "I take it negotiations proceeded satisfactorily?"

"The exchange will be made in two months' time."

Tonks gaped, "Two months!"

"They probably need time to repair the little Mudblood," Regulus commented casually, directing his gaze to Albus. "I assume you requested that she be returned in one piece, and I can only imagine the fun they've had with her until now."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Her wounds will need some...healing."

Tonks eyes widened in concern. While she still did not see how Hermione for Dumbledore was a fair trade, she had grown rather fond of the girl during her time at Grimmauld Place.

A pair of sky blue eyes regarded her carefully, their twinkling somehow dimmer than she remembered.

"I know what you are thinking Nymphadora," Dumbledore said kindly, as if reading her mind. "But part of the reason I made the blood pact here with Regulus, rather than in Voldemort's presence, was so that I could ensure Hermione's return on my own terms. He could have chosen to reject the blood pact had he so chosen, but he did not."

Tonks opened her mouth to ask precisely what those terms were, but his hand steadied her question.

"The terms were that if she were returned in the exact physical state that she had been in before the Hogsmead attack took place, that I would trade places with her, becoming Voldemort's prisoner."

"I bet he was only too happy to accept that trade," Regulus stated, smirking widely. "Imagine that...Albus Dumbledore, the Dark Lord's greatest nemesis, handed to him on a golden platter with a side of cherry."

"Actually," Dumbledore corrected, "I believe the expression is 'served on a silver platter with a cherry on top.'"

Tonks spluttered, focusing on the sick sensation within her stomach. The war effort, the Order, could feasibly collapse without Dumbledore's leadership, and here he was bantering with an ex-Death Eater, wizarding world deserter right after selling his life to the devil.

"Dumbledore," She said, voicing her far from calm thoughts aloud. "Why would you do this?"

Dumbledore's eyes locked on hers, losing their twinkle. "Nymphadora, we have lost far too many students to this war already. I could not stand by and lose another."

She swallowed the lump in her throat hastily. She should have known all along that the safety of others would always come first to Dumbledore. He would have done the same for any of them.

Love of one's friends was a powerful thing.

"So, old man," Regulus queried, taking a bite of his biscuit. "Find out anything else of interest during your little tryst?"

If possible Dumbledore's eyes darkened further. "We have to assemble the Order. The plague was unleashed in Dublin."

"Dublin, Ireland!" Tonks blurted rhetorically.

Regulus frowned, "As brilliant as you are, how were you placed in Ravenclaw again?"

She scarcely heard him, her eyes having darted over to the still slumbering forms of Kenneth and Emily.

Their home city was infected.

"So how'd you come by that fun fact Albus? I never exactly took you two to be old school chums."

For the briefest of seconds Dumbledore's eyes took on their old sparkle. "For all of Voldemort's prowess with Legilimency, he never quite mastered Occlumency. He has always surrounded himself with loyal followers." He continued, "And until recently he simply did not have the need."

Regulus chuckled. "So he's good, but you're better."

Tonks blinked. "But I thought he was one of the most brilliant students Hogwarts has ever seen?"

"Ah..." Dumbledore said, smiling again. "As is Ms. Granger, but even she cannot fly upon a broom."

Tonks gaped at him.

"We all have our weaknesses Nymphadora. Severus never would have survived his role as spy had he not been better at Occlumency and Legilimency than Voldemort. We should simply be grateful that this is one of Voldemort's few weak points."

Tonks frowned pensively. So He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did have weaknesses. They really were not fighting for naught.

With an air of finality Regulus clapped his hands together, making the already nervous Crusantheus bang his knocker rather loudly. The slumbering Ronald Weasley gave a violent start, snorting loudly as he awoke suddenly.

Tonks watched wearily as the redhead blinked groggily, eyeing the situation in front of him until his eyes landed on the Headmaster. It

took a moment before a figurative light bulb clicked on in his sleep-befuddled mind

"Professor Dumbledore!" He exclaimed, scrambling to his feet, a flurry of wooden crutch and gangly legs sliding on stone. It didn't take long before Ron was flat on his arse once again, groaning from his fall.

Regulus eyed him mockingly. "And they call Hufflepuffs the duffers."

Harry's eyes snapped open, his dreamless sleep shattered by the sudden outcry of the girl in his arms. Through slightly blurred eyes he stared down the bridge of his nose at the messy mop of hair resting upon his chest. The warm feeling he ought to have felt vanished, a numbing one replacing it at the sight of her expression.

For Kaylens there was no peace to be found in the realm of dreams.

He swallowed hard, watching her face crinkle into an expression bearing striking similarity to what he had once seen upon Cedric's father, as the man desperately clutched his lifeless son to him, oblivious to the swarming crowd around them.

Such undiluted sorrow should never be seen upon a human countenance, yet he had seen it palpably far too often. Even on himself. The root of such anguish had been buried deep within him, growing since the moment he had discovered his true fate: Kill or be killed.

All thought of his calamity of a future was suddenly shattered as Kaylens lurched violently, a chilling cry cutting from her throat.

Harry gaped, feeling the hair on his arms rising to stand on end. Without thinking his hands gripped her arms, her skin beneath his fingers turning white with the pressure.

"K-kaylens..." He stuttered, scarcely recognizing his own voice. He gave an experimental shove, shaking her lightly in a pathetic attempt to rouse her.

And that was when she cried out again. That sound ripping from her throat. It resonated through the dark room, terrifying in its raw intensity. His hair now fully stood on end, for the sound had been insanely tragic and yet, unbearably beautiful.

It chilled him to the bone, for it was a sound no human could utter.

It happened fast. One second his arms were wrapped tightly around her, shaking her in an attempt to rouse her, and in the next her arms wrenched away. She shot up quickly, her eyes flying open in the dark room only to be slammed shut as she uttered a more familiar shriek of pain. His relief was short-lived as he grabbed onto her arm again, for she pulled away so violently that they were both sent tumbling from the couch to the floor.

His back struck the floor first, his knees having been tangled unnaturally in the blankets. He attempted to right himself, pulling his legs down until he was on all fours.

A swift kick to the back sent his face smashing into the ground.

He groaned, and ignoring the throbbing pain in his nose he rose his head cautiously, squinting at his surroundings. Where were his glasses? Slowly he reached a hand out, allowing it to roam across the soft carpet in his search.

And then he remembered.

His glasses were still lying in some godforsaken puddle in the middle of that damnable forest. By now they were probably some acromantula's chew toy.

Cursing he blinked rapidly, his eyes finally adjusting to the darkness and settling on the slightly fuzzy outline of Kaylens. She was sitting upright, some good five feet away, with her knees drawn to her chest and her face buried within them.

He swallowed hard, the only sounds in the room now were his rough breaths and her rapid, erratic ones. In stunned silence he observed her as best as he could. Her bare feet were sticking out from beneath a thick blanket, which despite their tumble still partly covered her, while she breathed as if having run a marathon.

Everything that had transpired between them came flooding back, a tense feeling twisting within him.

"Kaylens..." He whispered, reaching hesitantly for her, only for her to recoil, scrambling away like a frightened animal.

He stared in astonishment as her back hit the room's wall, a strange whimper coming from her throat. Of all the reactions he could have foreseen, this was the farthest from it.

And now she was having the reaction that he would have expected from any other girl, but not from her.

She was sobbing.

The sound of her crying tore at him in ways he hadn't imagined, for the girl who had stood by him, facing Death Eaters and werewolves without blinking an eye, had been reduced to this pitiable state by a mere nightmare.

Instantly he stood, crossing the room to her in four long strides.

"Kaylens," He said, tentatively laying a hand on her shoulder. She whimpered, shrinking away from his touch.

His brow furrowed determinedly. "Kaylens look at me," He commanded, crouching directly in front of her. Still, her head remained determinedly averted, prompting him to grasp her by both shoulders.

Her head shot up, a furious clicking coming from her throat as she struggled away, lashing out violently. He dove back to avoid her

flailing hands and feet, landing on his tailbone, eyes wide in astonishment.

She was making that sound again.

And he recognized it. A dark night in the Forbidden Forest, where he and Draco Malfoy had encountered the unexpected, had taught him that sound of pain.

The sound of the beautiful creature's dying cries had reverberated in his nightmares for months.

As had Voldemort's shadowy figure...

There was no hesitation in his movements as he wandlessly summoned his wand to his hand, immobilizing her arms and legs with a flick of his wrist.

Kaylens was conscious, but incapable of lashing out.

He crawled back to her, taking her delicate wrist and pushing the sleeve of her battered sweater up.

The bruising was gone.

He swallowed hard, recognizing the odds of such bruising disappearing overnight. Now he was only certain of one thing.

Something had happened whilst he slept.

Licking his lips nervously he cupped her chin, raising her head until he could see all of the confusion swimming within her golden eyes. His breath hitched in horrible realization at what he was about to do, but there was simply no other way.

He had to know. He had to know what had happened whilst he slept.

Until then he couldn't help her, and he knew that no one else would be willing to do this. There were strict rules against the unauthorized use of Legilimency. Hermione had taught him that much, screaming

and ranting after his last misuse of the talent against the same girl he was about to violate yet again.

"I'm sorry," He whispered, brushing her hair away from her face. "I'm so sorry Kally..." He repeated, steeling himself for his crime.

Cupping her face he stared intently into her eyes, watching them flickering around in fear.

Her fear was warranted.

He only hoped he was wrong.

"Legilimency!"

The overpowering wave that was her life flooded his mind, capturing his senses in a whirl of indiscernible events. He groaned, desperate to stop the twister-like effect of the memories swirling around him. It was different than the last time, so unbelievably different...

A cacophony of clicking, beautiful and powerful in its raw intensity filled his mind, only to be replaced just as quickly as it had come with a familiar scream.

"RILEY!"

He was seeing it again, reliving the afternoon when she had seen her own brother murdered right in front of her. Only this time the images were fleeting, distorted as if he were viewing it through a thick pane of smoky glass. It was as if the memories were no longer her own.

His heart clenched as he watched the man kick open the door for the second time. Kaylens' small body was thrown backwards, her petite form sliding across the floor. It was as if everything were on the fast forward feature of a Muggle VCR. There was the knife, her screams, her brother...

As the gunshot rang out he could again almost feel what she had. The hot, fiery pain of the blade plunging into her flesh. The searing as

it was dug in a deep line across her shoulder blade. The fear as she watched the blood pooling from her brother's

wound slowly stop pumping...

Suddenly all was black, misty, the powerful sound of a herd stampeding through her thoughts. Then all was green and brown and green again. Somehow he was running faster than he had thought possible, the trees whipping past him in a blur of green and brown and green again. He was surrounded by others of his kind.

His name was Lightning.

The images twisted again, surrounding Harry in a confusing whorl of forest scenes followed by scenes of her childhood. Silver horns flashed around him, gleaming as the herd ran beneath the moonlight, while golden hair flashed throughout her life.

Another memory slammed into Harry, crystallizing into near clarity. It was mid-afternoon, though the sun barely shone through the overcast sky. Before him was a poorly kept yard, bordered on three sides by a thick, rising treeline and hills. Harry swiveled in the murky memory, feeling Kalliandra's recollection lurch dangerously as another memory threatened to bleed into this one. The sound of hooves, the sound of the herd on the run, pounded in the distance.

Harry fell to the dewy ground, watching as a man with golden hair, tinged heavily with gray, methodically stacked sandbags away from the house. Fog crept across the lawn, curling around his feet, each grunt echoing in the silent valley.

And then the children were led out, and Harry's soul shivered.

Kalliandra appeared to be the same age as in the last memory, only now she stood besides a small boy, barely older than her, digging her nails into his arm.

"S-sean..."

Their father pried her hands away from her brother, forcing a semi-automatic Glock 17, 9x19 mm caliber pistol into her small hands. Her legs had suddenly felt frozen, rooted to the damp ground. Harry could practically feel her heart's fearful thundering at the cold, unfeeling metal between her fingers.

The thick fog curled high around the six foot stack of sand bags, and as it began to drizzle her father aimed her small hands towards the stack.

"Shoot it."

Kalliandra pulled the trigger and cried.

As the gun was being passed to her surviving brother Kaylens' memories shifted again, swirling until he found himself peering through a thick grove of trees, stomping his hooves in warning as a hooded figure approached. The figure's hands raised very slowly, carefully removing the hood of their robe, allowing a cascade of thick, black hair to come tumbling around her shoulders.

The woman's countenance remained hidden by the deep forest shadows, yet Lightning was calming.

It was a virginal woman. She could be trusted. Lightning could tell.

The unicorn never saw the other cloaked figure creeping from behind, and that man's dagger soon shone silver with Lightning's blood.

Harry stood in the shadows drawing deep, ragged breaths. He could practically feel every inch of pain the poor creature was going through, the only sounds that of the screeching animal and that of the dry branches cracking beneath Harry's shifting weight as he watched, powerless to stop its pain.

The man bottled and corked a measurable amount of blood from the unicorn, leaving it only enough to barely limp away alive. A light chuckle escaped the hooded Death Eater at the sight.

Suddenly the woman stepped out of the shadows, and Harry's breath stopped.

Angelina stood in the dim light, depositing the bottles into a thick bag slung across her shoulder. Her Dark Mark gleamed brilliantly.

Violently Harry felt himself being tossed out, finding himself flat on his back staring up at Remus' shocked face.

Kalliandra continued to whimper.

"Would you mind repeating that?"

Tonks blinked stupidly. Somehow she had thought that being told that the "plague of all plagues" had been unleashed upon the citizens of Ireland would have had more of an effect upon its President.

Instead the newly awakened Kenneth Bothan sat behind Dumbledore's desk, clasping his hands, waiting for her response with an inquiring look upon his face.

She silently damned Albus for having left them to break the news to Kenneth while he went to call an emergency meeting of the Order. She wasn't good at this sort of thing damn't! She had at least expected a rouse out of the man at the news, but instead he was irrefutably calm.

It was quite obvious that Kenneth was insane.

"Basically Ken, all of your people will be dead within the week," Regulus stated with ironic cheerfulness. "But look on the bright side. At least you won't have to run for re-election."

Tonks' dark eyes swiveled to her cousin, her mouth opening and closing like a gaping fish.

Kenneth, however, seemed entirely unperturbed.

"So," The President started with a curious frown, "What you are saying is that wizarding folk have no treatment against this?"

"Well..." Regulus mused thoughtfully. "We could always Avada Kedavra those who have already contracted it. That ought to slow its spread, right Nymphadora?"

"Regulus!"

Kenneth looked appraisingly at her cousin. "And this Avada Kedavra treatment? How effective is it?"

Regulus grinned like a jackal. "Supposing we were able to isolate those who had already contracted it we may find out its method of dispersal, while simultaneously establishing a quarantine and treating the pain of the already afflicted..."

"By killing them!?" Tonks burst in, unable to believe the wicked game Regulus played with the President's hopes.

"Ah," Kenneth said as if suddenly understanding. "The treatment has a high mortality rate. How high though?"

Regulus grinned widely, while Tonks contemplated murder for the dozenth time in twenty four hours.

"Harry! What in the name of Merlin did you think you were..."

Harry closed his eyes, grinding out his words. "Something's wrong with Kalliandra," He interjected. "I had to find out what."

The room's silence was broken only by Kaylens' laboured breathing, and her clear distress drew Lupin's attention from him to her. He felt the former professor drop to his knees besides them, and he cracked an eye to watch as Lupin scrutinized her.

The Professor looked flabbergasted as he picked up one of her stiff arms. "Harry, you've immobilized her."

"For good reason."

Lupin threw a disgusted look over his shoulder, and snatched his wand out, clearly intending to remove the spell.

"Professor I don't think tha..."

His protestation was too late, for Kaylens had already lashed out, landing a strategic kick that sent Lupin sprawling flat on his back next to Harry.

"I told you," Harry groaned, shoving himself up on his elbows to note the pained expression of Remus' face. "Kicks hard, doesn't she?"

Lupin coughed harshly in response, choosing to ignore him as he rolled over to check on Kaylens. She was already scrambling along the wall on all fours, backing herself into a corner like a frightened animal. On her way she somehow managed to hit the only other piece of furniture, besides from the couch, and several small volumes came spilling down, scattering across the floor like rocks thrown from a distance.

The crashing sound only intensified the poor girl's whimpering.

Harry's eyes remained on her, watching as she curled her legs to her chest in a feeble attempt at self-protection. But he knew the truth...there was no protection from what plagued her.

But he'd be damned if he didn't try to help.

"Professor..." He started slowly. "What kind of curse does drinking unicorn blood entail?"

Lupin opened his mouth and faltered. Harry remained lying on his back, his upper body propped up with his elbows, silently hoping to God that the Professor would put the pieces together. Lupin had to

believe him. He had to trust him. None of the adults, save for those dead and buried, had ever trusted him in time for it to actually matter.

It was why Sirius had died. And somehow Harry didn't think he could take it if the last link to his father failed to trust him.

Then slowly, ever so slowly, the lykan's head turned towards him, and even in the dark room Harry could see the sudden knowledge flashing in his eyes.

Moony understood his meaning.

"Her bruising is gone," Harry whispered, driving another blow to any doubts the professor could have. "What else in the wizarding world could heal someone that quickly?"

Lupin drew a deep breath, shaking slightly.

"Harry...if what you're saying is true..."

"It is," He assured. "I saw memories inside of her mind that were not hers."

Kaylens' whimpering had finally quieted, casting the room into a deathly silence.

Besides him Lupin swallowed audibly, contemplating Harry's statements in the deathly silence that had descended. Kaylens was no longer whimpering, and he was unsure of if he missed the reassuring sound of her presence, or if was pleased at the obvious easing of her distress.

He glanced at Lupin, stunned at the torn expression upon his former professor's countenance. Did the man believe him or not?

He sighed in frustration, snapping at Lupin's unresponsiveness. "Why would she have those memories, Moony?"

Hearing his old Marauder name snapped Lupin out of his contemplative stupor. "It's magically potent...unicorn blood that is. In

fact it is so magical that their memories are often heavily imprinted upon it." He shook his head slowly, as if clearing a hazy fog. "To possess a unicorn's blood is to not only possess their life stream, but their very being."

Lupin sighed heavily. "There is not much precedent for this, but....in the early 1900's medi-wizards began experimenting with different treatment options for terminal diseases. One researcher, familiar with unicorns, sought to harness their healing powers by injecting his terminally ill patients with the animals' blood. It cured the patients but the side effects..." Lupin shuddered, digressing quickly. "The blood was too hard to obtain to begin with. Unicorns don't normally donate willingly, not to mentio..."

"What side effects," Harry interrupted hoarsely, closing his eyes. The feel of her in his arms flooded his senses, the woodsy scent that had clung to her all night coming back, overwhelming him with a tidal wave of fear. In his life there was no room for new attachments, yet the thought of her in pain...

He knew without a doubt that he would kill for her again, just as he would kill for any of those he held close.

He only hoped it would not come to that.

His eyes snapped open as Lupin's distressed voice filled the room.

"Most went insane."

Harry nearly choked. "Insane?" He grated out.

Lupin looked years older. "They never were able to distinguish between themselves and the animal again," he relayed. "Can you imagine it Harry? Having a lifetime of memories that were not your own suddenly shoved inside of your mind? Unicorns live for hundreds of years...it was only natural for those obtaining their blood to become confused. To them it would feel as if they had spent a longer time being a unicorn than a human being."

The sick sensation twisting within him intensified. Kaylens' mind had revealed exactly what Lupin now spoke of, and the thought made him nauseous.

And the curse...God he had nearly forgotten...

Remus read his mind, continuing his scholarly recitation of facts aloud. For Remus, who had lost so much, it was easier than dealing with the devastating fallout facing them in Kaylens' crumpled form.

"When one slays such an innocent creature, seeking their blood's healing power, it leaves the curse of the half-life. But when one is given the blood unwillingly, or when the animal is left alive, the curse does not lessen; it simply changes its manifestation."

His throat constricted, but Harry managed to croak out a single word.

"Explain."

There was no mistaking the sick look upon Lupin's face. "Harry, the only ones desperate enough to kill such an innocent creature are those hanging onto life by a thread. But the price...it is far too high for any sane person to contemplate, for the price for their atrocity is losing all ability to love. A life without the capacity for love is devoid of joy, happiness, family..." He shook his head, disgust etched in his every feature. "In a desperate attempt to save their own life they lose the only thing that makes life worth living for. Once they take that path they truly lead half a life, only experiencing the darker sides of the emotional spectrum."

"Then the mediwizard, the one using it to cure his patients, did that happen to him?"

Lupin sighed indulgently. "There are ways to collect it, ways for it to be done without incurring the wrath of the curse but...those ways take time, Harry. Gaining the long term trust of a unicorn, let alone permission to inflict injury upon it, are not easy tasks."

He swallowed hard. "What about Kaylens? That won't...it won't happen..." He trailed off, unable to vocalize such morbid thoughts aloud. No human deserved that. She didn't deserve that.

Once again Lupin looked ill. "For Kally it will be different," He said gruffly. "Instead, if she recovers, she will love, but her every experience will be shared with both sides of her, diluting the intensity of the emotions she feels, diluting her feelings towards others..."

Something about the words sent Harry's heart twisting.

"Unicorns...they are such innocent creatures, incapable of sin, incapable of inflicting pain... Could you imagine having a saint following you around for the entirety of your life, correcting your every mistake? Well from this moment on she will be sharing her mind, her life, with memories of what true innocence is, for a unicorn is the true embodiment of that, and with it will come a gnawing guilt over the sins she has committed in the past. Between the confusion over her identity and her newfound guilt over even the smallest of transgressions...that alone could be enough to drive some mad."

Harry's mouth twisted into a frown, "So she can't sin?"

"If only it were that easy, Harry. She can, and she will. But having this will give her a conscience stronger than most, and living a perfect life is an impossible task. Her life will be as close to normal as possible, only she will feel far guiltier about things she does than others."

"A half life..." He whispered aloud, suddenly understanding. Kaylens truly would be cursed, for she would always be sharing her mind with memories not her own.

None of this was her fault, and the thought sickened him.

"Not all the mediwizard's patients went insane," He finally said, recalling Lupin's earlier words. "You said most."

Lupin shook his head. "They all went insane at first Harry. But only two managed to reclaim enough of their minds to function. Two out of dozens."

Harry closed his eyes, his voice filled with sardonic irony. "She just can't catch a break, can she?"

The Professor shook his head in response. "There's only one way to be sure."

Without warning Lupin snatched his wand out, summoning a small flashlight. Soon a metal blur came flying through the doorway, landing in the professor's outstretched hand.

Harry frowned at the action, not understanding, but in one swift motion the professor had it on and aimed at Kalliandra's face. Lupin clearly knew exactly what he was looking for.

Kaylens was suddenly shrieking again, and judging from the grim look on the professor's face he had found all he needed to know.

A metallic click sounded as the flashlight was turned off, and Kaylens' cries instantly died down, slowly fading to a dull whimper.

"She's sensitive to light..." Lupin stated. "There are only two conditions I know of that cause that."

"She's not a vampire..." Harry stated coldly, earning a reproving look.

"I wasn't even about to suggest it. But animals tend to have better nocturnal vision than us Harry. Lykans and unicorns are no exception, and when I was first bit..." He trailed off, his face twisting into a peculiar expression. "Once I was bit my whole body changed. My eyes were the worst though."

The professor suddenly adopted an almost whimsical expression. "Did you know there are more square nerves per inch in your eyes than in any other part of your body? Well there are. If you ever want to cause someone pain just jinx their eyes and..."

"Professor," Harry interjected, at the moment not carrying about the finer points of jinxing.

Lupin shrugged. "My bite caused a whole new layer of tissue full of light sensitive cells to grow across the back of my eyes, its called tapetum lucidum. It lets me utilize less light to see, so I can see with one-sixth the amount you can. But when it first happened...before I was used to it..." He shuddered. "Merlin it hurt. The slightest light felt like the sun was blasting me in the face. Hell, it had me in tears."

Lupin raised the flashlight, pointing it directly at Kalliandra, flicking it on and off with each syllable. "Just. Like. Her."

Kaylens' whimpers died down as the light was turned off for a final time, and suddenly Harry understood the flashlight. Unicorns had excellent night vision as well, and the flashlight was Lupin's way of confirming what he already knew.

Kaylens had a layer of light sensitive tissue growing across her retinas right now. No wonder she screamed at the light.

"Harry," The scholarly professor tone was suddenly gone, and the wolf was deadly serious. "Was she fine last night? Before she lost consciousness?"

Harry was quick to nod.

"Then sometime between then and now someone injected that blood directly into her veins. She couldn't have done it herself."

Harry's mouth opened, but his question of how that was possible died on his tongue.

He knew the answer.

There was only one person who would wilfully curse another within the house.

"Professor what's going on? I heard yelling."

Harry's eyes narrowed, every muscle tightening. Angelina had finally come, drawn by the incremental shouting. There she was, rushing

through the room's threshold, drawing her cloak hastily around her as if nothing terrible were amiss.

If he hadn't known better he would have thought she truly was surprised at the situation she found. But he knew better. No one took that long to respond to screams like the one's Kaylens had unleashed unless it was intentional.

"Why is it so dark?" Her voice sounded honestly confused as she flicked her wand out, lighting every candelabrum in sight.

His eyes flew to Kaylens, who had immediately began shrieking, clamping her hands over her eyes, screaming as if hell itself has sent its demons up to drag her into its depths. His chest constricted at her obvious pain.

Lupin lunged at her in a decidedly wolf like way. "Kally, don't!" He was shouting, fighting her for control. She lashed out, and Lupin grasped her wrist in a single, fluid motion, quickly capturing the other as well.

The professor had already forced her hands down against her sides, kneeling on her legs in a vain attempt to prevent them from flailing. He was far stronger than Kaylens, but she was desperate, fighting to block the hellish light from her eyes as Lupin fought to prevent her from inflicting damage upon herself. Now he was yelling at Angelina to extinguish the candles, and Harry still had not moved.

He was too busy watching Angelina, noting the guilt flashing within every brown pigment in her dark eyes.

Her black eyelashes fluttered, and the betraying emotion was suddenly gone.

His blood boiled, his arms vibrating with suppressed rage as she began speaking, a panicked edge to her voice.

"What's going on?" She asked fearfully, rushing across the room to aid Lupin. "Remus!"

What's wrong with Kally!?" She continued shouting questions, lunging over Harry as if he were not even there.

She dropped to her knees besides where Lupin and Kaylens wrestled, her ebony skin gleaming in the candlelight. Her dark eyes widened in feigned horror, her face a mask of innocent concern as she reached out to help restrain Kaylens.

And Harry lost it.

Her hand never reached Kaylens, her tainted fingers never touching her body. Before anyone could realize it Harry's hand had flown out, snatching the oversized sleeves billowing around the traitor's wrist, and he tugged her callously to the floor.

Harry lunged to his feet, stamping the heel of his foot against the girl's throat, pinning her to the ground.

"Don't. Touch. Her." He growled, the world rippling around him.

Power swelled within him, the strength of his magic unleashed by the raw anger pumping through his veins, and the feeling...it was intoxicating.

Angelina's body undulated like a worm beneath him. She was choking, spluttering incomprehensible sounds, the shock clearly written across her face. Her hands were clawing at his foot, her fists slamming against his legs as she fought for air.

He scarcely noticed any of it.

"H-harry...st-top..." She gasped, her eyes rolling backwards, fingers going slack as her pleas went unheard.

"Harry! Let her go!" Shouted Remus, followed by a loud crashing as he and Kaylens tumbled into the bookcase, knocking it sideways.

Books went flying, scattering everywhere. The resounding crashing masked the dull thud of Angelina's limp arm hitting the floor.

Lupin let out a pained howl, and Harry's hand shot out. He felt the magic dripping from his fingertips like water.

With a flick of his wrist the candles went out.

The descending sun of midday zenith was partially obscured by the perpetual cloud cover, casting the not-so-distant Dublin-Wicklow mountains into a deep fog. Yet the man paid the ominous surroundings no mind, nor the racking cough that had swiftly descended upon him. Instead he stared out the windows of his South Dublin address, admiring the view afforded by his working class neighborhood.

With a small smile he leaned further back into his recliner, letting the smoky scent of fresh baking fish fill his nostrils. Meredith was cooking, and from the smell of it she was cooking the fish he had caught just that morning. They were bound to taste delicious. Everything his wife cooked always did. It was just a shame their middle child, Eva, had inherited his culinary sense, or lack thereof.

"Father, you feeling alright?"

The man turned to find his eldest son in the doorway, a concerned expression crossing Edward's freckled face. The man smiled, for the resemblance between father and son was striking. Edward had been the only child to inherit both the freckles scattered across his nose and the dark head of hair adorning his head. The other two of his children bore his wife's ash blonde hair and startling dark eyes. Edward however had his blue-green ones.

He graced his son with a warm smile. "I'm just fine m'boy. Just a bit of a cold."

"You sure father? Perhaps after dinner we should take you to the physician. Your neck looks awfully swollen."

Curiously the man rubbed his tender lymph nodes, shocked to find that they had doubled in size in just a few hours.

His son smiled cheekily. "Mother is of the mind to not let you go off fishing at such ungodly hours again. She said something about catchin' yer death on account of our colder than normal temperatures."

The man couldn't resist a grin. "Well perhaps yer mum is right. The thermostat dropped to 10 Celsius this mornin' before I ventured out."

"I'll tell her you said so."

The man's eyes widened in mock horror. "Now you'll be doin' no such thing boy! Because I'll guarantee that once yer mum's done houndin' me that yer'll be next."

Now it was Edward's turn to look fearful, and the man leaned back, smiling in satisfaction. The boy still remembered the time Meredith had wrapped him head to toe in a snow-suit, complete with two scarves wrapped around his head and oversized mittens. Oh! How the boy could hardly walk in that contraption!

"Father," Started his boy diplomatically, "I think I'll just be off to get a head start on my Algebra."

The man smiled in satisfaction as the door closed behind his boy. Yes, despite their humble surroundings his boy would soon grow into a fine man. And while he had never been able to provide all that he desired for his children, they did wonderfully with what they were given.

It was no small point of pride for the man that he had worked his way from the north side of Dublin to the south. While most of the people in his income class tended towards the northwest side of the city, here he was, raising his family in Tallaght. It might not be one of the wealthier districts characteristic of South Dublin, but its rich sense of history had captured his children's hearts from day one. He still remembered how young Eve's eyes had grown wide as saucers as he had explained the origin of the district's name.

Tallaght. Pit of tears. The very name was reminiscent of the mass grave dug there during the last Black Plague. Thousands were said to be buried just beneath the sewers, and that little bit of knowledge had had all three of his children off and running, screaming and laughing in increments as their young minds invented ghost stories along with it.

How proud he had been when Edward had shown him a story he had written. It had been about a young boy and his ghostly friend, a child who had died during the Black Plague. The ghost child had been buried beneath the fictional boy's home, and had appeared to the boy when another unknown illness ran rampant through the city. With the ghost child's help the young boy had been able to save the city, and his family.

The man leaned back in his chair as a bout of coughing shook his lean frame, a deep pain shooting through him. He clung to the hand rests tightly, waiting for it to pass, all the while thinking of the future.

Yes. An author would be a befitting profession for his eldest. Edward would one day make a fine novelist.

The man smiled, proud of his children in a way that only a father could be.

If only he knew how soon history were to repeat itself.

A/N: My sabbatical from writing is officially over, so from now on please expect regular updates. I should update at least once every two weeks.

Thank you so much to Andrew, Njhill22, and Ichigopan for helping me out a lot with this chapter. Andrew not only helped to work out some of the plot kinks for this chapter and the next, but he also beta-read it for me, and therefore rocks. Njhill22 and Ichigopan are also awesome, because both of them helped me until 3 am when I wound up seriously stuck on how to write the next part. Thanks so much you guys!

Hopefully everyone's reviews received a response. I went through and replied to all of them, so if for some reason you did not get a reply drop me an e-mail and let me know.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

William Shakespeare

Chapter 29 No Longer Helpless

With a flick of his wrist the candles went out.

His heel remained solidly planted against Angelina's chest as shrouds of darkness shot out in all directions, like the spindly fingers of a corpse, until the entire room was engulfed in an inky, suffocating darkness. Harry scarcely noticed any of it, nor the thick scent of burnt wax as unseen smoke curled up from the extinguished candles.

Anger pumped heavily through his veins, and with a hate he had not thought possible he glared down at the girl beneath him. In the past his callous actions against his former house mate would have sickened him, but now...

Things were different.

His outstretched hand shook, his barely restrained magic crackling across his skin like static electricity, burning and searing at his flesh. Grimacing in pain he forcefully curled his fingers into a fist, tightening it, feeling the raw power seeping back in

A new feeling rose up within him. A dark, powerful, vengeful feeling.

Bearing the coldest of looks he crouched low, inspecting Angelina to ensure that she was indeed unconscious. He would not make the mistake of thinking a Death Eater subdued when they were not, but her death would do him no good.

He intended to find out all he could from the treacherous wench.

Then, beneath his foot, he felt the slow rise and fall of her ribcage, and his leg twitched with the suppressed urge to stomp the breath from her. For the first time he understood what Ron had meant when he had drilled him on the differences of fighting defensively versus offensively in chess.

From now on Harry was out to win, and if that meant taking down the opponent's pawns to do so he would show no hesitation.

Swallowing back a nauseous wave of revulsion he reached out, touching the tainted witch's skin and shoving her head to the side. It lolled over with a dull thud, revealing nothing. The Death Eater would not be moving for some time.

Good.

Still...they had all been fooled by Angelina's acting skills once. He would not fall victim to that again.

With calculated efficiency he withdrew his wand, a frightening look crossing his features. His anger still burned hot within him, the veins in his neck pulsing intensely as he thought of the witch's betrayal. Angelina had been his house mate, a teammate, but worst of all, she had nearly been a friend. Once she was a Gryffindor. And now...

She had betrayed the Order by taking the mark of that snake, and had all but killed Kaylens, possibly robbing her of her mind.

A growl ripped from his throat, the tip of his wand suddenly digging against the traitor's temple as he pondered all the spells he could use.

Thunk.

"Harry, stop!"

He stopped cold. Remus' gruff, panicked voice had cut through the air like a well sharpened knife, sending his wand arm tensing as his father's last friend fought his way out from beneath the books that had fallen atop him. In the aftermath of his own scuffle he had nearly forgotten Lupin's presence, and the thundering of his pulse in his ears had drowned out the low groans and whimpers from the other side of the room.

He had forgotten one other thing: That despite the lack of lighting in the room, Lupin could still see exactly what he was doing.

"Lumos."

Harry's head snapped around as a soft glow cut through the thick darkness, his gaze riveted to the horrified expression crossing Remus' face.

His one-time Professor stood behind the overturned bookcase, eyes wide and staring.

"My God..." He whispered chokingly, "Harry..." His accusatory eyes flickered up to his. "What have you done?"

He sucked in a strained breath between his teeth. "Nothing she didn't deserve," He hissed staidly.

A strangled sound came from the Professor's throat. "But Harry...that's Angelina..."

"No kidding. Really?" He snapped.

A sudden scuffle and thud, followed by a sharp, inhuman whimper sent his wand jabbing into Angelina's head.

"Kally..."

He hadn't needed the Professor's devastated whisper to know who was softly whimpering.

Heart wrenching, he fought back the hollow feeling in his chest. "Why don't you see to Kaylens, Professor," He grated out, his face a grim mask as he focused back on the former chaser.

"I will but...is Angelina okay?"

"I sure as hell hope not."

A loud swallow preceded Remus' next, tense words.

"What are you planning on doing Harry?"

"You know Moony," He said, voice vibrating with barely suppressed rage. "I'm still deciding on that."

Lupin's voice was strained, the cautious, placating note in it foreign to him. "Harry, I know something's wrong. But just think about what you're doing..."

A cruel, hollow laugh escaped his throat. "Oh, trust me Moony, I have."

"She's on our side, Har..."

He cut him off, spitting out the cold truth.

"She's a Death Eater, Moony."

From behind him came a loud, apprehensive swallow. "Harry...are you sure?"

A cold grimace crossed his features. "Yes."

There was an agonizing pause, and a sick, uneasy dread suddenly rose in his stomach as his racing pulse finally began to slow. He needed Remus to believe him. He needed someone in the Order to not just listen to him, but to actually trust him. And if Remus didn't...

"I'll bind her. She'll have to be taken to headquarters."

Harry's head bolted around, shock written on his expression. "You believe me," He questioned. And even in the dim light he could see the slight movement of Remus' shadow nodding.

"Harry," He said, sounding almost hurt. "I always believe you."

His brow instantly wrinkled in confusion. Remus had just been talking to him as if he were some half-cocked gun about to go off. "Then why..."

"Because I thought you might blow her head off before I could figure out why /i you had attacked her in the first place. It would have been a very Sirius-like thing to do."

The thought struck him hard. "Yeah," He managed. "It would have been like him."

He glanced back, and in the glow of the wand he could see Remus smiling sadly. He returned the expression, feeling shakier than he would have thought possible only minutes before, but that didn't matter.

Remus believed him. He did care about him after all.

His apologies for all those lost months, for all the time when he had been left to deal with the pain of Sirius' death alone truly had meant something, and despite everything a warm sensation wormed its way into him.

All it took was a soft whimper, from a corner behind him, to drive it all away.

He swallowed hard, finally turning and squinting in the dim lighting to see Kalliandra cowering in the corner, knees drawn feebly to her chest, her golden hair spilling over them and her face buried within them.

Slowly his blood pressure rose, his foot grinding down even harder against the wench beneath him. Angelina would pay. He would see to it. But right now she was not his priority.

Kaylens was.

Throwing a piercing glare at Angelina he shoved his foot beneath her limp body, kicking her over onto her stomach. A second later he was on her back, dragging her hands behind her, pinning them together with his knee as he snatched up his wand, pointing it at her exposed wrists.

"Bindovera," He hissed, watching the snake-like ropes stream from its tip, slithering around her arms until she was bound up to her elbows. Dropping his wand he gave them a harsh tug, satisfied in the way the dark girl's skin chaffed, reddening even in the dark light.

"Exuberant, aren't we?"

He merely grunted in response, giving the ropes one final, callous tug as Remus began binding her legs.

A second later he was on his feet, an aching sensation spreading through him as he watched Kalliandra curling in the corner, incapable of remembering even her own name.

Gods...she wasn't in her right mind. And Remus had said she'd have to block out the unicorn's memories before she ever could be. How could anyone possibly...

And then it hit him.

She'd have to block them out.

The idea ignited swiftly, the things Dumbledore had taught him about Occlumency all coming together in a cohesive ball of knowledge. He had used it for himself, but could he do it for someone else?

He would be grasping at straws, but there was a chance...

Voldemort had given him plenty of practice at blocking unwanted memories.

His blood pumped purposefully, and he felt, more than saw, Remus rise besides him, looking morosely in the same direction as he.

"Well have to immobilize her again," He said regretfully, dimming the light from his wand as it sent Kaylens stirring uncomfortably.

"No," Harry answered immediately, voice filled with conviction. "I'll deal with her. You just get Angelina to Grimmauld."

Remus' brow furrowed at this, doubtful lines crisscrossing his face. His mouth opened, as if to protest, but

his uncertainties went unvoiced. Instead a thoughtful, critical expression befell him as he studied Harry's tense, determined face.

The lines on his face suddenly deepened. "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded, tense with anger at the entire situation, and filled with the need to do something about it.

"Yeah," He responded. "I've stunned her enough lately."

Lupin's conflicted expression remained, but he nodded decisively.

"Alright, take this then."

A second later a small pouch was being pressed into his hand, a sandy material grinding within it.

"It's a port key. Pour the contents..."

"Into our hands," Harry finished for him. "We've used this kind before."

Remus eyed him curiously, tilting his head to the side. "Well then, I'll see you there."

He nodded, watching as Remus unearthed another pouch from his pocket. He watched him crouch next to Angelina, sending him one last, pointed look before dousing his wand.

Shadows spilled around them, enshrouding the room in darkness once again. Rifling a hand nervously through his hair Harry forced a strained, unseen smile, and a second later Remus and the traitor blinked out of existence, leaving him with a single insane idea, one that he never could have done in Remus' presence.

And somehow he thought Remus had known that.

For a moment he did nothing, simply allowing his eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. Then, slowly, the blackness gave way, revealing her vague, gray outline. Yet even in the shadows he saw the way her silhouette trembled.

He pulled his wand and immobilized her in one swift motion. Strangely he felt nothing, when even the thought of stunning her again had sent his stomach wrenching.

He crossed the room and knelt besides her, his rough hands gently cupping her face and turning it towards his. He felt sick, for he was violating her yet again. But God, what choice did he have?

For the second time that day her frightened eyes stared back at his, flickering with too many emotions to name. His thumbs gently brushed her hair away from her eyes, his heart thumping shamefully. She was like a frightened animal, and somehow this just felt wrong.

Yet he had to try. No one deserved this, and if his idea worked...

He might just be able to salvage enough of her to help her find her way back.

Staring into her eyes he hoped to God it would work.

"I swear to you," He whispered intently, "This is the last time I'll ever do this to you."

Licking his lips nervously he raised his wand, letting it hover inches from her skin. Closing his eyes he waited, allowing his mind to clear, calming himself.

Occlumency was not meant to be done with raw emotion.

His eyes snapped opened. He was ready.

"Legilimens!"

The twister-like effect of her mind seized him without remorse, sending his senses reeling as an assault of enhanced sounds and smells attacked him.

Thunder cracked through the swirling mist, sending his body crashing face first into the mud, and he immediately knew there was something different about this memory.

He staggered to his knees, peering through the incredibly dark, moonless night. Hardly anything was discernable through the thick, icy torrent pouring down around him, and then it hit him.

Every other memory he had seen had had a worn contrast, the intensity of emotions and events diluted by time. Dumbledore and Snape had been too skilled for him to peer into recent events, and luck-of-the-draw had shown him things from Kayelns' childhood. But this memory was different.

It felt fresh.

The harsh, biting wind sent the looming forest moving with an aberrant life, and above him lightning flashed, crackling across the blackened clouds, briefly illuminating the gravel road running past him.

For a second the forest surrounding him came into stark focus, as did the wooden house he had landed before.

Again lightning set the area aglow, a deep shout snapping his eyes towards the small lawn.

What he saw made his blood run cold.

His training with Dumbledore had taught him that it was one's most painful memories that were flung to the forefront of the mind when it was invaded.

And now he knew that Kalliandra was no exception.

A grating voice preceded the flash of light, and he had just enough time to see a dark haired man struck down. The man tumbled head first into the muddied ground, the sound of his body slapping against the mud drowned out by a thunderous crack.

A blinding hot, fiery ball blew through the house's siding, sending floorboards flying to litter the lawn.

From inside came the screaming, drowned out by a hedonistic laugh.

"Muggle, muggle, muggle come out to play!"

Bile churned in his stomach, though there was no time for it to rise as people began pouring out of a side window.

"Aw, the wittle, ittle Muggles don't want to play?"

That taunting, familiar laugh of his nightmares greeted him as Bellatrix Lestrange stepped calmly out the front door, the burning home alighting her face with a hellish glow.

One of the fleeing figures bolted towards a car, parked along the gravel road near the forest's tree line.

He never made it.

A fiery spell smacked into him, setting his skin ablaze.

He had seen others die, but never before had he beheld someone as they burnt alive. Even the pouring torrent was not enough to douse the flames engulfing the man's flesh, and the wind hurled a noxious stench against his nostrils.

"MATT!"

A girl was rising from the muddied ground, thick grass stains streaked across her jeans, her brown hair matted against her head as she screamed hysterically. Her face was contorted into something inhuman, raw pain distorting incredibly striking features, and she appeared frozen in place.

Harry was screaming for her to move, but she never heard him. From around the corner of the home came two others clad in black, and a jet of searing purple light shot out.

Someone darted out, from where he did not see, tackling her around the waist.

The purple light missed her by inches as she and her rescuer went sliding across the ground, smacking into the side of the house with a dull thud.

The Death Eaters were on them in an instant, a loud crack resonating through the air as Harry ran forward, just in time to see a graying haired man's arm being viciously snapped. The gun the man had been pulling fell from his hand with a cruel slosh, the mud swallowing it whole. The dark haired girl was still screaming, clawing at her head as a burly Death Eater snatched her hair up, twisting it around his massive palms before dragging her across the lawn by it.

A sharp splinter broke the air, and the Death Eater assaulting the gray haired man went down. The older man struggled to his feet, slipping in the mud and cradling his arm.

"DAD!"

Lightning split the sky, catching onto the gray haired man's few remaining golden hairs. His face split into a horrified expression, and Harry followed his gaze.

Kalliandra, eyes ablaze, came barreling out from the tree line, a man barely older than him hot on her heels.

Both had striking golden-brown hair, their hues muted only by the precipitation pouring down around them. And Harry suddenly understood that he was seeing her second brother for the first time.

"KIDS GO! GET OUT OF HERE!"

The shout came from a second floor window, and Harry finally understood who had done the shooting.

A middle aged woman with light brown hair was hanging out of it, pistol in hand, and over the noise Harry could hear Bellatrix laughing hysterically.

Lightning split the sky, thunder drowning out the second, third, and fourth gunshots.

Kalliandra's mother could no longer be seen. Only the dim sound of the fifth and sixth gunshots firing off in the room told him that her attention had been drawn back inside the burning house.

Inside the house, where he could not hear, came the sequential clicking of empty chambers.

A loud scream carried through the window, followed by a body flying through the window's opening.

The woman hit the ground with a sickening thud, leaving the gray haired man yelling something that the thunder drowned out.

No time was wasted. Kalliandra's brother came sliding aside her mother, grasping the gun from her still twitching hands, sobbing as he started rifling through her clothing.

A second later a new round was in his hand, but he never had a chance to load it as Bellatrix apparated in front of him, kicking the round from his hand, sending individual bullets scattering to the wind.

The strobe effect of the lightning shielded what transpired next, but when it flashed again Bellatrix and Kalliandra were sliding to the ground, Kaylens clearly having tackled her.

"KALLY, NO!"

Her brother had leapt to his feet, and rushed to join the fray as his sister smashed Bellatrix's head into the ground repeatedly, screaming incomprehensible words.

Her brother reached her, grasping her by the back of her sweater and tossing her out of the way as he grasped Bellatrix's head in a vice grip from behind, preparing to break it.

The unheard pop of apparation prevented this as the burly man appeared behind him, swatting him away as if he were nothing more than an irritating child. Bellatrix fell to the ground, spitting brown water, her furious eyes rounding on the three remaining members of the Kaylens' family.

"Filthy Muggles!" She roared, shooting binding spells off at a furious pace, hitting the brother first.

"SEAN!" Their father's voice ripped through the air as ropes twisted around his son, sending him crashing to the ground right below the burly Death Eater's feet.

Kalliandra, having been thrown back by her brother, was still down in the mud. She didn't stand a chance.

Then her father slid in front of her, the ropes taking him right in the chest, and constricting around his neck and throat.

The house was quickly succumbing to the flames, the red light showcasing Bellatrix's fanatical smile as she tugged Kaylens' father away from her by his neck.

Her father was unable to claw at the ropes, for his arms had been pinned to his sides.

He was unconscious by the time Bellatrix had dragged him to her feet.

CRACK!

Another gunshot rang out, taking the burly man right in the head.

Kalliandra had gotten to her knees, hair plastered to her face, her arms outstretched and shaking.

Her hands held the gun, and Bellatrix regarded her with an amused expression.

The next shot was in Lestrangle's direction, but a shimmering light halted the shot, sending the shell dropping to the ground less than a foot from her smirking face.

Kally looked stunned, and Bellatrix wagged a finger back and forth as if scolding a naughty child.

"Foolish wittle girls shouldn't play with guns," She cooed in a baby voice, suddenly beckoning towards Kally.

Kaylens was sent sprawling forward as an invisible force pulled the gun from her grasp, and a second later a new Death Eater was there, his foot on her back.

A gust of wind sent the new arrival's hood falling back, and Harry suddenly understood every word that she had uttered in the Three Broomsticks.

Ludo Bagman was there, standing on top of Kalliandra and looking rather out of place. Bellatrix fixed him with a death-like stare, her anger at his late arrival apparent, but there was no time for anything to be said.

Barely a second had transpired between his late arrival and his fall to the ground.

Kally had rolled over, kicking his legs out from under him.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes, and this time her binding spell did not miss.

Angry tears were rolling down his face, his fists taking swings at the crazed woman who had taken his Godfather. Somewhere his mind was screaming for him to stop, that it would do no good, but his subconscious' voice went unheeded.

"Crucio..."

And then the swirling, silver mist returned, swallowing up the images of Kally's brother convulsing beneath the unforgivable curse.

Harry was shaking, overcome with the horror of what he had just witnessed. And the memories were disorienting, rising up around him, swallowing him whole as they dislodged him from place to place in her life, never stopping long enough for him to gain his bearings.

Around him the crashing of hooves fought for precedence above the distant laughter. Hazy outlines flickered by, barely visible through the fog-like mist swirling around him. He was lost...

And then he saw himself, running from a Death Eater down the main, dusty thoroughfare of Hogsmeade. Red stunners shot out, smacking against a gutter, sending it swinging into the side of a second Death Eater that had emerged to block his progress.

She had saved him.

And that was all it took.

"ENOUGH!" He screamed, unsure of whether his voice only existed in her mind, or if his physical body were actually screaming it in Remus' living room.

Instantly he began focusing, searching for a memory, any memory, that was her own rather than some horned animal's. He fought to calm himself, squashing down the terror of what had happened to her to the back of his mind, and then he felt a change.

The swirling mist around him was slowing down, the uncontrolled torrent of the two lives combined into one mind becoming less disorienting.

He peered through them as they passed, one-by-one, searching for something that he could make out.

And then he found one.

He charged through the mist, falling out into the Forbidden Forest's clearing.

The one they had left before this had happened to her...

In the dim moonlight, cast from a sliver peaking through the clouds, he watched the replay of himself yanking his hand away from her. Hushed words were exchanged, and suddenly Kalliandra was rising from her spot besides the water, stalking away from him.

In a heartbeat his memory self was scrambling to his feet, going after her, catching onto her arm. She whorled to face him, an icy expression crossing her face, disappearing in shock as he swiftly pulled her against him.

He watched, an odd feeling twisting within him as she struggled against him, his only response in the way his arms wound even tighter around her, stroking her hair until her resistance ceased.

"I'm sorry..." He heard his own voice whispering, "I swear to God I'm sorry..."

And then her face was dropping against his shoulder, his own burrowing within her hair as her arms wound around him, holding him back.

It was as if a light wind blew, and then another memory squeezed through, the silvery substance sending the clearing image swirling.

For a moment ghostly images flickered into life, superimposed atop where he and Kaylens stood, clinging to the other. It was like looking through a film negative, trying to see what was beyond it.

The beautiful, alien clicking rose above his and Kaylens whispering, the foreign memories threatening to overtake this one, and the threat sent something ablaze inside him.

"No..." He hissed, his face contorting dangerously, as he began fighting to shove the foreign images that threatened to overtake her aside.

He couldn't allow them in. He couldn't.

Staggering odds were against him, but if he could only hold her in her own state of mind long enough...

Maybe it would be just enough to bring her back.

Grimacing he waved his hand, feeling the magic rising within him, rolling off of him as he tried desperately to summon something, anything that would block out those memories that were not hers.

The unicorn memories may have been weak, diluted imprints of the real thing, yet they were still there, fighting for precedence of her mind. And yet...

Fighting for the sanctity of his own mind against Voldemort had made keeping these silvery, diluted tendrils back a joke.

A determined expression crossed his face, a swift jolt rocketing through him as the bricks began to materialize. He stretched out his hands, willing them to begin stacking, watching them mount higher and higher, muting the sounds of a herd in the distance.

He would form a barrier between her memories and the unicorn's, and he'd be damned if he failed.

His hands were shaking again, a lone trickle of sweat dripping from his brow as he concentrated, directing the bricks to begin circling around him, stacking along the clearing's circumference.

And then, one-by-one, he began shoving the unicorn's memories past the wall. Each time one threatened to break in he shoved it away, a dull pain growing in the back of his mind, sending his head swirling as he refused to cease his efforts. His breathing grew ragged, his vision bespeckled with black dots as tendrils of the silvery mist fought to seep back through his hastily erected brick walls.

"No..." He whispered, and slowly, methodically, he shoved the last of the silvery threads through the gaps in the walls, feeling the muted sounds fading.

With a slam of finality he found himself surrounded on all sides by his walls, the memory still playing as if nothing had disturbed it.

Panting in exhaustion he crouched down, supporting himself on his knees, feeling his feet sinking into the dewy earth as he fought for breath. The walls might not hold for long, but for now...

Around him he could hear the distant calls of a herd, and he looked up shakily, watching dust crumbling down from the brick barriers. A lump formed in his throat as he watched the entire edifice shake, as memory after memory slammed against it from the outside, trying to break through.

He could feel his physical body shaking from the exertion, and as much as he desired to do more an unfeeling truth struck him.

He didn't know what else he could do.

And for the first time in her mind he withdrew willingly, the darkness of Remus' living room wrapping tightly around him. The moonlit clearing had been so bright in comparison and yet, his eyes had remained perfectly adjusted, his physical body having never left nor moved.

And she was still right there, inches separating him from her. His breath caught in his throat, the adrenaline he had been riding on struggling to remain high as he searched her face for a sign to show that some part, any part, of herself was back.

All he saw were the backs of her eyelids as they fell shut, a long breath escaping her lips.

At some point his entire body had begun shaking, a sharp headache nearly splitting his skull as he removed the binding spell from her, his magical exertions finally catching up to him.

But God, he didn't care. His hands rose to her face, a hand resting on either side as he smoothed a single stray lock away, tucking it behind her ear.

"Come on Kaylens..." He murmured, eyes bright and searching. His gaze was flickering back and forth across her face, watching her every movement, hoping against hope it had worked.

And then her eyelids opened, her eyes as disoriented as before. A choking sensation wrapped around his throat, his hands falling to rest on her stiffening shoulders. He had failed.

His forehead fell against hers in despair, the feel of her warm skin offering little comfort. He should've known it would not work, yet...

He never would have forgiven himself if he hadn't tried.

Slowly her legs slid against his, and his eyes squeezed shut, preparing himself for whatever out lash was about to occur. The memory of her recoiling away from him, scuffling away like a frightened animal when he had gotten too close, was all too fresh in his mind.

He waited for it with held breath, only nothing came.

His eyes opened, only to find hers staring back.

His muscles went taut with tension, his breath quickening as their proximity struck him. Her nose pressed against his, his hands firm on her shoulders, and a startling sensation churned in his chest as he watched her darkened eyes.

Within them something was changing, a flicker of familiarity residing there. His hand slid back to her face, anxiety etched in his features as her lips parted. Her mouth moved, as if trying to say something, only no words came.

He couldn't pull his gaze away if he tried.

"Merlin," He whispered, "I wish I knew what you were thinking."

She remained silent, but his eyes were drawn to a slight motion. Her hand rose, falling to rest on his unshaven cheek. She pulled away slightly, their foreheads no longer pressing together as her confused eyes flickered across his face, a curious expression befalling her.

His brow furrowed, a question forming on his lips.

"Kaylens?" He whispered, eyes searching hers desperately.

A distressed look crossed her features, her bottom lip drawing between her teeth, sending his heart thudding uncertainly.

And then she was nodding.

Suddenly she was in his arms, embraced tightly against his chest. She was trembling, enticing his own shaking arms to pull her even closer, the need to physically touch her overwhelming. Gods...he couldn't get her close enough.

The shock was finally hitting him, frightening him on too many levels to name as he realized how fleeting this could be.

She was with him again, but only until the walls he had created went tumbling down.

Merlin, how long did he have?

A tremor shook him, an urging need to get her to someone better than him, to someone who could do something, driving him.

He needed someone, someone like Dumbledore. He could strengthen the walls he'd put up inside her mind. He had to.

Fearing to release her for even a moment his arm tightened around her shoulders, his other reaching for the portkey in his pocket. A moment later his fingers were sliding through hers, his hopeful gaze locking onto her tormented one.

"Kaylens," He murmured intensely, "Stay with me."

And then, hoping that she was coherent enough to understand what they were doing, he dumped the sandy contents onto their linked hands, feeling that distinctive tug.

In that last second he threw his arms around her, wanting to shield her from whatever harsh landing they were about to experience.

"My respect is earned, not given."

Saying of the Ages

Chapter 30 To Hell with Decorum

"Harry!"

Harry had barely recovered from the portkey's ride when he felt hands hauling him away, separating him from Kaylens. He blinked, only slightly dazed, and found himself strewn across the dark wooden paneling of Grimmauld Place's study.

The hell of it was, he could hardly see a thing.

"How is she?"

In the dim light cast from the wall-mounted candelabras he saw Remus' shadow drop down between them, placing a hesitant hand on Kalliandra's shoulder. Harry could only see the werewolf's profile, but judging from his expression, Remus looked genuinely surprised when Kaylens did not immediately pull away.

Harry's eyes cut through the darkness, finding hers.

Something warm swelled within him when he realized that she was looking right back at him, scarcely a hint of confusion within her expression. Disbelievingly he watched the candlelight dance in her glossy orbs, and for a brief second he was able to believe that she may just pull through with her sanity intact.

"Harry!"

Remus' sharp voice cut through the silent room, drawing both pairs of teenage eyes to the worried adult.

Harry found his voice quickly. "We need an Occlumens. Right away."

Remus' head jolted around, the reflective layer behind his eyes shining. "Harry, what did you do?" He asked uneasily.

His shoulders stiffened, and in that single loaded question he found his resolve.

"What I had to."

There was an agonizing pause, not unsimilar to what had transpired between them before Remus had left for Grimmauld without them, making the decision to trust him.

Harry only hoped Remus would not come to regret it.

A moment later Remus was on his feet, nodding at Harry. "Stay with her."

"The thought of leaving never crossed my mind," He replied honestly, scooting across the floor back to her. The sound of a swinging door, and the voices beyond it, drifted in, but Harry scarcely noticed.

"Kaylens," He whispered, reaching hesitantly for her. With trepidation his fingers slowly curled around her upper arms, whilst his eyes swept searchingly over her face. "You still with me?"

Taking in her every movement he watched her eyes flutter exhaustedly, her chest and shoulders rising as she drew in a fatigued sigh.

And then the insufferable girl fixed him with an exasperated look, nodding tiredly.

He released the breath he had been unwittingly holding, relief sweeping through him. Immediately his hands found her face, the pads of his thumbs moving along her cheekbones with a gentleness he didn't know he possessed. For a moment he simply stared at her, watching the amusement in her gaze only grow.

Merlin...he had been afraid that the swirl of the portkey would disorient her, causing her to lose whatever fledgling bits of sanity she had managed to grasp onto at Remus'. Hell...he vividly recalled their last portkey ride, and that alone had rendered her unconscious.

He stared at her, his eyes boring into her bemused, albeit sleepy, expression.

Suddenly her hand rose, her fingers curling gently around his own where they rested against her cheek. He squeezed her hand gently, finding reassurance he hadn't known he needed in her actions.

Had he been asked a month ago, he never would have guessed that he would be feeling Kalliandra Kaylens, of all people, squeezing his hand in hers. But more than that, he never would have thought that such a simple, innocuous gesture could send his chest stirring.

He swallowed hard, watching the hint of a smile form on her lips. His hand immediately flipped over, taking her cold hand more firmly in his, and tightening his grip on her.

"You're finding this amusing, aren't you?" He accused quietly, his voice unnaturally constricted.

Her mouth parted, only to shut again, her bottom lip drawn between her teeth as she began nodding.

And then he saw it. Amidst her expression was a flicker of fear, and for the briefest of seconds he saw her eyes clouding again.

"Kaylens!" He said sharply, dropping her hand and grabbing her by the shoulders, shaking her suddenly trembling form. "Please! Stay with me!"

Whether it was their physical contact or his voice, he would never know. But suddenly she had gained some sense of herself again, and she had hurtled herself against his chest, her entire form shaking like a leaf.

Harry had never felt more helpless in his life.

And Snape just had to choose that exact moment to walk in.

"What do you think you are doing now, Potter?"

If he wasn't so desperate for help he might have hexed him. Instead his uprising of fury was suddenly quenched as a single thought permeated his panic-ridden mind.

Snape was a Master Occlumens.

Still clutching onto Kaylens as if his life depended on it, he met the Potion Master's critical gaze head on.

"Professor, I need your help."

Snape's entire face crinkled indifferently. "Get off the floor Potter. I don't have time for your games," He clipped, starting to brush past them. Instead he paused mid-stride, eyeing them distastefully.

"And do remove yourselves from here. Undoubtedly you are both choked up about that know-it-all friend of yours, but really Potter, such displays are not meant for public exhibition."

The Slytherin Head of House flipped his robes, practically striking them as he continued striding across the room's expanse towards another door. Harry's jaw dropped, shock and fury mingling on his angry face. "Damn it this is not a joke!" He roared, watching Snape halt. "Kaylens needs help!" He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to calm down. Where in the hell was Remus?

"Professor," He finally ground out, as if the respectful term pained him. "This is not what you think. This is not a display. Something happened to Kaylens. Someone injected her with unicorn blood and I..." He plowed forth, ignoring the fact that he had not a semblance of a clue on how to explain the situation. "I tried something on her. I used Legilimency to get into her mind, to try and help, but..."

He hesitated, meeting Snape's emotionless expression. "I created a wall, similar to the ones they teach beginners in Occlumency, to separate her memories from the foreign ones. But I'm not sure it's working."

His sharp gaze locked onto the blank expression of his most hated Professor.

"She needs help. I need someone to reinforce the wall I made, and I sure as hell am not capable of doing it."

Unreadable as he was, Snape didn't appear to be about to help. But he didn't make any further attempts to leave.

Running his hands through Kaylens' hair comfortingly, feeling her trembling slowly subsiding, he felt anger at Snape's unresponsiveness begin to stir.

Harry's expression suddenly grew challenging. "Now," He demanded, voice ablaze. "Are you a Master Occlumens or not?"

A flicker of annoyance crossed Snape's face. "Your attempts to appeal to my ego and better nature are pathetic, Potter, considering that I am secure in one and lack the other."

His blood practically boiled.

"Look," Harry spat, dropping all pretense of respectfulness. "You hate me. I hate you. I get that. But this isn't about either of us, and I'll be damned to admit this, but you are the only one here that can help her at the moment. Hell, I'll even give you a free shot at me. Just help her."

Snape's lips curled angrily, as if considering.

"Follow me," The former Slytherin finally sneered, snapping a hand towards the far door.

Harry's fist clenched as the man disappeared through the doorway, not bothering to wait around for an acknowledgement. Drawing a strained breath between his teeth he glanced down at Kaylens, and the tension drained out of him.

Her entire, mud-streaked face was crinkled in concentration. God...she had been so wrapped up in trying to remain in her right

mind that she had barely noticed the tense verbal spouting match around her.

"Hey," He murmured, a rough hand reaching out and cupping her chin, forcing her to look up at him. "You still okay?"

Her eyes glittered with confusion, but she managed another nod.

He forced a smile. "Try not to hold this against me," He whispered, standing up and scooping the startled girl into his arms. "But frankly I'm not sure I trust your walking ability at the moment."

She uttered not a sound, simply nodding resignedly, eyes half closed. He swallowed hard as her head fell to rest against his shoulder, and he found himself carefully averting his gaze from her as he crossed the room quickly, kicking open the door after Snape.

The fact that he didn't hit the man with it disappointed him only slightly.

"Put her on the couch."

His brow crinkled uncertainly. Was he really about to just hand her over to the same cruel, bitter man whom had wreaked havoc on his own mind in the past?

He realized that he had very few options at the moment.

He sunk down into the cushions, clutching her to him. Readjusting only slightly, so that her legs lay loosely draped over his own, with her head resting against his shoulder, he wound his arms protectively around her, sealing her in a vice grip that he was sure she would protest to if she felt up to speaking.

He didn't care though. There was simply no way in hell that he would be leaving her to face the Potions' Master's mercy alone. And irrational as it was, his exhausted, battered mind somehow equated squeezing her to easing whatever ordeal the Occlumens was about to put her through.

He tilted his head down, burying it in the top of her messy head of hair. "Let him do what he has to do. It'll help," He reassured quietly, hoping he would not regret placing his faith in the acerbic man's abilities.

He pulled away only slightly, his arms still looped around her waist, and her hazel colored eyes turned up, studying him intently.

"How very touching."

Harry's head jerked up, only to be greeted with Snape's mocking sneer, and an expression that clearly told him to get the hell out of the way.

"Move aside boy."

Harry's eyes hardened, his grip reflexively tightening around her. "No."

Snape practically twitched. "Insolent child, move. I will not be doing this with you in the way."

"The last time I checked," He retorted, "This only required eye contact. Even you taught me that much. And seeing as how I'm not blocking you from that..." He let his caustic reply trail off.

With a growl Snape leaned forward, grabbing Kaylens chin and practically snapping her head towards him.

The repressed urge to strike the man rose up, fury rifling through him at her distressed, shocked expression, but Snape's wand was already drawn and aimed, an intense look in his eyes.

"Legilimens."

An eerily calm expression suddenly befell Kaylens' face, while Snape's contorted into one of the utmost concentration.

Harry could only wait.

He dropped his head back against the wall, heaving an exhausted sigh.

The grandfather clock chimed. Kaylens' skin grew cold to the touch. Snape's dark, frightening eyes bored into her wide, doe-like ones.

He watched the clock

Twelve minutes and thirty-three seconds later, Lupin still had not returned.

But his two silent companions did.

Kally jerked, almost violently backwards, her back hitting the armrest of the couch. Harry barely managed to stop her head from smacking into the wall as she slid off of him.

Snape's movements were not nearly so sudden.

Unnoticed to Harry the man rose from the floor, a pale hand brushing imaginary dirt from his robes. And then slowly, almost methodically, the man's fingers tightened challengingly around his wand, his knuckles turning white with the pressure.

It took Harry a second to notice the man's penetrating gaze, but when he did an unsettling sensation overtook him.

The Potions Master was looking at him, a strange look in his eyes.

Fear.

Blue-green eyes appraised the rather full waiting room of the Adelaide and Meath Hospital's emergency room.

"Bugger."

"Father, this is for your own good."

"Couldn't this wait until Monday?" He ventured, trying to plead to his son's better sensibilities as his eyes took in the mass of people. "By the time we finish waiting in line it'll be tomorrow and the physician's office will be open anyways. Is this really where you want to spend your Sunday?"

The man turned around to find his eldest son's eyes narrowed in reproach.

"Father, you were coughing up a storm at home and..."

"It was just a small itch in my throat..."

Edward ignored him. "Dad, you collapsed at the dinner table from that small itch."

"Well really, I was actually just choking on some of your mother's cooking. It was positively unpalatable. Honest."

The boy arched his eyebrows skeptically, clearly not buying this. "Funny, considering how you were praising that fish filet just before your lungs seized up.

The man groaned. "Honestly, Edward. Do you really think that I would criticize your mum's cooking to her face?"

Yes. Wait for it. Ah, there it is.

His son was now full out laughing at him. Of course, he could hardly blame him. His wife, Meredith, could have been a chef had she wanted to. The woman had never cooked nor baked something sub par in her life.

But that wasn't about to stop him from trying to get out of this cursed, congested waiting room.

"Father," croaked out his son, "Aren't you a bit old for harboring phobias of doctor visits?"

He grunted in response, racking his pounding head for another excuse. Honestly, he really thought that his family was overreacting. His lymph nodes might be swollen, and indeed his head was pounding as if Circes himself were waging a small war with his neurons. But really all he needed was a good night's rest.

Perhaps he could blame the coughing fit and his wheezing on having tried some cigarettes while fishing that morning. Of course, Meredith would have his hide skinned and filleted before he would even have a chance to shout for help...

The man was caught unaware when his son rather abruptly shoved him into a wheelchair.

"Edward..." He hissed gruffly, only for his threat to fall on deaf ears as Edward bypassed the main line, shoving him to the second check-in window reserved for those experiencing either chest pain or shortness of breath.

And it was then that the racking cough again shook him, the knife-like pain attacking as if the Grim Reaper himself were holding the blade. He clutched onto the wheelchair's arms, gritting his teeth, an acidic burn working its way up his throat.

A painful stab began in his chest, sending his body jack-knifing forward, nearly out the chair. A sharp shout near him made him aware of the frenzy of activity that had begun beyond the check-in desk, and strong hands abruptly latched onto his shoulders, preventing him from falling face forward.

A foot shot out, kicking the wheelchair's brake into place with a metallic click, and suddenly the rocking, swaying motion that he had not even realized to be going on ceased.

The pain in his chest dulled down to a dull burn, and his hand flew to his mouth, feeling the sputum expelling with the next shuddering gasp.

He coughed once, twice more, before leaning gratefully forward onto his son's shoulder, gasping for air.

It was then that he noticed the man in the white lab coat kneeling next to him, and it dawned on him that the cold, metal feeling on his back was the stethoscope, which the doctor had already managed to slip beneath the back of his shirt.

Feeling winded, he looked at the physician's concerned face, and forced a weak grin. "Well," He gasped wryly. "I think it's safe to say, that I am short of breath."

Lupin bowled into the room, Dumbledore in tow. The forceful thud of the door flying open and slamming against the wall effectively causing Snape's white-knuckled grip on his wand to loosen.

Harry's gaze snapped to where Remus stood, asking him what had happened.

He barely heard him, suddenly feeling so, so incredibly stupid. In his desperation to obtain help he had failed to be patient, unable to wait for Lupin's return. And it only now occurred to him why it had taken the werewolf so long.

It would never have occurred to Remus to have gone to the nearest Master Occlumens for help. The trust between the old Marauder and Snivellus was nonexistent, so there was no way in hell that Lupin would have trusted the man to delve into Kally's mind.

So he had gone for Dumbeldore.

Harry already felt like an idiot. Snape simply seized the moment to express his agreement.

"Potter couldn't possibly have done this," He declared.

Snape's statement hung on the air as Dumbledore, looking only slightly weary, swept his gaze back and forth between the three of them. First his blue eyes studied Kalliandra, pity and curiosity mingling together on his lined face, before turning his kindly gaze to

Harry. And then, finally, his spectacled gaze locked with Severus Snape's.

A strange silence filled the room as the two became locked in a staring match. It took Harry only a moment to realize what they were doing.

They were communicating through Legilimency.,the two masters exchanging all of the information about the situation that they needed to know.

Remus seized the moment of privacy, kneeling in front of where he and Kaylens lay tangled up. "Harry," He began quietly, so as not to interrupt the two. "Please tell me you didn't let him..."

Harry grimaced. "I did."

The werewolf released an exasperated sigh, fixing Harry with an annoyed stare. "I'm not even going to ask what you were thinking. It's quite obvious that you weren't."

"He is a Master Occlumens," He argued, feeling almost dirty at having just defended Snape. "I wouldn't willingly allow someone to hurt her."

A flash of amusement temporarily replaced the critical look on Remus' face. "This coming from the person who personally removed quite a bit of her hair, in what Crusantheus assured me was a full-out brawl in the Headmaster's office."

Harry cringed. "You heard about that, huh?" He asked sheepishly, glancing to where Kalliandra lay, looking for all the world as if she were sleeping.

Remus followed his gaze. "Hermione actually wrote me about that. Something about wanting me to talk some sense into the both of you. Personally, I'm still trying to figure out how she knew I was tutoring Kalliandra in the first place."

"You were tutoring her?"

Remus nodded, looking at him curiously. "How did you think we were acquainted?"

"She was a professional groomer and Moony was in need of a cut?"

Lupin sent him a withering glare. "Of all the things to inherit, you had to get your father's cheek."

"I didn't realize it was his."

Remus seemed to considered this. "Yours is actually a bit more caustic," He related. "Unless Prongs was talking to someone he severely disliked, his comments were never quite so biting."

"So I'm bitter. Can you blame me?"

Moony's expression softened considerably. "No, Harry. I cannot."

Abruptly Lupin's attention turned firmly to Kaylens, his concerned look returning full force. Harry simply watched as Remus reached out, carefully brushing a lock of her persistently tangled hair away from her face, studying her like a concerned father.

Remus paused, as if considering something. "Well," He finally commented, "You two certainly look uncomfortable."

Despite himself, he nearly laughed at the absurdity of the statement. Not that it was lacking in truth, for when Kaylens had jerked back she had wound up with one leg still draped over his own, one hanging halfway off the couch, with her thin form half-slumped between him and the armrest.

And now, she had apparently fallen asleep in exhaustion.

Harry smiled strainedly. "Yeah, well...I wouldn't want to risk incurring her wrath by waking her, now would I?"

Nevertheless he found himself adjusting, to the point where he felt rather secure in knowing that if he let go of her, that she would no longer be in danger of sliding down to the floor.

Remus simply watched this, a crease forming across his forehead.

"Harry," He ventured. "What exactly did you do for her? Specifically."

Harry frowned, considering how to respond to this. However, he did not get the chance.

The two Occlumens in the room had started blinking again, their exchange, apparently, complete.

"As I said, Potter couldn't possibly have done this," Snape restated, ignoring the questioning looks Lupin was throwing at all of them.

Kally chose that moment to let out a sleepy murmur, stirring in her sleep. And somehow that small sound of hers reawakened Harry's fear that he had somehow harmed her mind in his attempt to help her in the first place.

"I didn't hurt her, did I?" He blurted out, earning a sharp stare from Remus.

Fortunately Dumbledore responded quickly.

"No, Harry. You did not."

Snape let out a sound not unlike that of an angry cat. "Albus," He disrupted, clearly in disagreement with the Headmaster's acceptance that Harry had, indeed, constructed the mental barrier. "The level of proficiency in Occlumency that one would have to possess to have done this would be staggering. There is no possible way that Potter could have done this." Snape hesitated. "I'm not even sure that I could have done this."

"What?" Harry shot out, startled by the admission.

"Would someone terribly mind filling me in on what exactly the three of you are talking about?" Interjected Lupin, sounding only mildly annoyed.

Snape acted as if the man had not even spoken, his dark eyes swiveling to Harry instead. "I don't know what you are playing at Potter," He snapped heatedly. "But you did not do this to this girl."

Harry's eyes narrowed, a slow burning anger growing at the Potion Master's stubborn refusal to believe him capable of anything.

The greasy haired man's gaze grew more challenging. "Who really constructed that barrier, Potter?"

Harry's teeth clenched. "I did," He ground out.

"LIAR!"

Dumbledore rose a placating hand. "Now Severus, lets not be hasty. Harry has been under my tutelage since the start of term, and he has improved greatly. Particularly in regards to his ability to construct mental barriers."

"No one improves that much in so short a time. Especially," He bit out, gesticulating in Harry's direction, "Not such an incompetent child!"

Harry's eyes hardened. "Like you would know, considering you're the one who refused to teach me."

"You are impossible to teach Potter."

"Perhaps if you were capable of dropping petty school day grudges I wouldn't be."

"You are just like your father," Snape practically growled.

"I wouldn't know," He spat matter-of-factly. "Perhaps you could share stories sometimes. Reminisce about having your undergarments placed on public exhibition."

Remus snorted.

"Harry, that was uncalled for," Dumbledore admonished.

Harry bit back a laugh. "Considering everything he's put me through over the years I highly doubt that."

Snape's normally controlled features twisted into something livid. "How dare you speak to the Headmaster with such disrespect..."

"I respect the Headmaster plenty," Harry snapped. "It's you that I have no respect for."

"Has it occurred to anyone that arguing will get us nowhere?" Remus interjected.

"If Potter hadn't blatantly displayed such a lack of decorum..."

"Decorum?" Harry interrupted. "This isn't your little class with all of its ridiculously anti-Gryffindor rules! So forgive me if I don't grovel at your feet to earn your approval!"

"That is the last time I ever help you, you ungrateful..."

"YOU DIDN'T HELP ME! YOU HELPED HER!" Harry screamed, launching himself off of the couch and to his feet. It was only Remus' quick reflexes that kept Kally from tumbling with him.

Grunting in annoyance, Remus turned to Dumbledore. "Do you get the feeling that this argument was a long time coming?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Why do you think I'm letting them carry on?"

Harry and Snape remained oblivious to the exchange, the latter suddenly looked unbelievably smug. "That's funny Potter, I don't recall telling you that I helped her at all. Come to think of it, all I did was take a look at that barrier. I must admit though, she does have some rather interesting recent memories..."

Harry's eyes took on a wild look. "That has nothing to do with..."

"You're right. But this has everything to do with your inability to respect your betters and to follow the rules."

Harry snorted. "Funny, considering you're the one who's always saying how the normal rules don't apply to me."

"No you idiot boy! I'm always telling you how arrogant you are to think that the normal rules don't apply to you."

"Considering I'm the one who has to off good ole' Riddle for everyone you'd better hope the rules don't apply to me. Otherwise next time the killing curse might actually work."

Snape scowled dangerously. "I'll see if it works," He hissed, fingering his wand.

"ENOUGH!"

Harry's mouth snapped shut, his retort lodging uncomfortably in his throat.

Outside, in the main entrance hall, Mrs. Black began screaming.

"If anyone didn't have a headache before, they certainly will now," Remus practically groaned.

"Severus," Addressed the Headmaster, absentmindedly nodding his agreement with Lupin. "From what you've shown me, it looks like all that was done was a separation of Ms. Kaylens' memories from the unicorn's, and that is all."

"That's all?" Snape responded edgily, his anger apparently undiluted despite the sudden change of subject. "You make it sound as simple as identifying one species from the other."

Dumbledore shrugged, looking at Harry with a sudden burst of pride twinkling in his eyes. "It's true, that what Harry did required a high degree of skill in the area. But I think if you really think about it

Severus, you'll find that Harry was more than capable of having accomplished this."

Severus snorted.

"After all, Severus, all Harry really did was construct a wall inside of her mind..."

"Not just a wall, Albus. It was a perfect wall."

Harry couldn't help himself. "Perfect? It was full of holes! I thought the thing was about to collapse!"

"You mean to say that you were attempting to create a rigid structure?"

"Yes," He hissed. "Now will someone please explain what he meant by perfect?"

"Will someone please explain what wall we are talking about?"

Again everyone ignored Remus' attempt to extract what was going on from them.

"Potter," Snape drawled, as if talking to a particularly slow pupil. "Had a rigid wall been constructed, there would have been a complete separation of the two sets of memories in the girl's mind."

"Yes, I get that," Harry snapped, feeling frustrated. "That's what I was going for."

Snape's dark, greasy eyebrows arched up. "Even a rigid wall would have eventually crumbled, and when that happened it would have been akin to releasing a floodgate of foreign memories in her mind. So the effect would have been the same as it was initially."

"Meaning?"

Snape practically rolled his eyes. "She would have gone insane again. I know this level of conversing is a bit of a strain on your mental facilities, but please, do try and keep up."

"That'll be enough, Severus," interjected Dumbledore. "What he means to say, Harry, is that a weak barrier with holes will allow the foreign memories to slip into her mind a few at a time. It'll allow her to become slowly acclimated to the new memories, as opposed to her being forced to manage them all at once. Now I imagine the task of sorting through everything will be rather draining on her..."

Snape snorted. The Headmaster ignored him.

"But in a few hours she should have a pretty solid grasp on what memories are hers, and what are not."

"A few hours?" Harry would trust Dumbledore with his life, but somehow this seemed far too easy. He would have thought cramming a lifetimes worth of memories into a new head would take far longer.

Suddenly the Headmaster smiled. "Ms. Kaylens has been rather fortunate to have been given the blood of a relatively young unicorn, Harry. In fact, the animal is barely older than her. For the next few weeks she'll gradually gain more and more of its memories, but the worst should be over relatively soon."

"How can you know how old it was?"

"Is, Harry. Just because the unicorn's blood was taken does not mean that it was killed. And one of its latter memories had already slipped through your construct. So Severus was able to see it, and pass that information on to me. She's actually gotten very lucky."

Despite this reassurance, he was still uneasy. "And what happens when that wall I made completely breaks down?"

"A slight headache, I would imagine. Nothing more."

"But..."

"For the love of Merlin! She'll already be acclimated to the memories Potter!" Snape practically shouted, apparently unable to contain himself any longer. "Your little girlfriend will be fine!"

Harry balked. "She's not..."

Snape waved him off dismissively. "Like I care."

Dumbledore casually flicked his wand in their direction, silencing them both. Harry gaped like a fish, noticing Snape doing the same.

Dumbledore let nothing show on his face, but simply turned to where Remus and Kaylens still sat.

"Remus, as interesting as this verbal fray has been, I think that the best thing for , at the moment, is rest."

Lupin looking rather like a worried father, nodded his assent. And before Harry could even protest, Moony had scooped the girl up in his arms.

Fixing Harry with a pointed stare, Remus inclined his head as he left. "She'll be in the room Hermione and Ginny used."

Snape, apparently having unsilenced himself, let out a derisive scoff that bore a strange resemblance to the words "I'm so sure."

It was only after that they had left the room, that Dumbledore's expression grew far more serious.

"Harry," He stated seriously. "I think it's time you explained exactly what happened with Angelina."

"WHERE IS SHE!?!?"

The man's voice rose furiously, awakening her from her Crucio-induced slumber with a start.

Her dark eyes snapped open, her unfocused gaze shooting uselessly around the pitch-black room.

She had been left in complete and total darkness, unable to discern even a single detail of her surroundings. The cold, silk sheets beneath her were the only clue she had to suggest that she remained in the same room as before.

Only now she was mercifully alone, with only the lingering, bone-deep pain of the inflicted curses for company.

An unsettling feeling of futility settled firmly within her chest, but she would not, could not, lose hope. Instead her resolve strengthened, and she forced herself to listen very carefully.

Outside in the hall two people were arguing fiercely, their exact words muffled, though every so often the one would rise about the other, a dangerous note in his accented speech.

Her brow creased fretfully, anxiety filling her. There was something very familiar about that voice. Something her intelligent mind screamed she should have been able to recognize instantly.

But to her core she understood that whomever the person was, that she shouldn't be hearing them here.

Not in a place where only Death Eaters roamed freely.

An icy foreboding flooded her veins...

The door to her room suddenly flew open, a broad shouldered man forcing his way in, his silhouette shadowed by the hall's firelight.

It felt as if someone were suddenly choking her, an agonizing chill overtaking her in a way that the Cruciatus curse would never be able to touch.

The man's defined jaw line, one so very familiar to her, was set firmly.

A heart-wrenching betrayal ripped through her, snatching her heart in its vice grip as she watched his mouth open, forming the words she had once loved to hear.

"Hermy-owh-ninny."

Author's Note:

I just wanted to say thank you to Andrew for having helped me out so much with this chapter. He has not only beta-read the last few chapters, but has also helped me to tweak them to make them easier to read.

"We often give our enemies the means of our destruction."
Aesop The Eagle and the Arrow

Chapter 31 Trust Me

"Hermy-owh-ninny."

Her name fell from his mouth, his unbelievably relieved sounding whisper sounding deafeningly loud. And despite the heavy shadows cloaking him, she was able to discern the sudden change overtaking his masculine features, as the anger drained right out of him.

She didn't believe his act for a second.

The orange light of the hall, spilling into the room, blinked out for a second as someone crossed the room's threshold. Now the frame of an equally large man filled the doorframe, his shoulders heaving in exertion, his ragged breaths sounding menacing amongst the impenetrable shadows.

Viktor's dark eyes, darker than even their surroundings, narrowed at the sound. Though he did not turn.

What transpired next happened within the spanse of a breath.

The shadow of a man whorled in the dark, right as the one unknown to her moved.

Viktor was no more than a blur, a colossal mass of sinew and muscle that flew forward. An unbelievably thick forearm shot out, smacking into the stranger's hand quicker than Hermione could comprehend.

The drawn wand, that had been aimed right at the seeker's heart, clattered across the polished floor, disappearing within the darkness. The stranger's arm had resisted Viktor's strength, the sound of their arms colliding failing to resonate as it ought to have.

Together they stumbled, off-balance, before crashing against the wooden door. The crafted cedar swung violently, striking and sinking into the wall, their massive bodies thudding against it.

Neither saw Hermione diving to the floor, her every muscle cell screaming in pain.

She did not care.

Her knees struck hard, her hands flying out, eyes widening as she desperately tried to get her pupils to dilate. She needed to see!

Above her someone's fist swung out. It missed, crashing into the wall, and a loud crack split the air as a fracture went splintering up it, sending dry wall sprinkling down.

Propelling herself forward, she sought out the spot where the wand had skidded.

An elbow smashed forward, a guttural sound of pain tearing from Viktor's throat as his nose's cartilage crunched under the blow.

Her fingers, tingling numbly from the curses she had been subjected to, swept across the floor. Where was it!?

Then, moving faster than she would have thought possible, Viktor seized the front of the man's robes, twisting him around and smashing him against the edge of the door frame. A second later his elbow slammed against the man's throat, effectively pinning him in place.

In the dark Hermione's fingers brushed against something. Her hand darted back, her fingers closing around her weapon.

She spun around, wand drawn and aimed, stunners on her lips...

And froze.

Neither man noticed her, shrouded as she was in the shadows. But she noticed them.

And what she saw crossing Viktor Krum's face shook her to her very core.

On his face he bore an expression of such raw, unadulterated hatred that despite the repertoire of curses spinning in her head, that she suddenly felt afraid.

Viktor's dark eyes bore into his assailants, while the attacker's hands curled around Viktor's hand, tugging and pulling, to no avail.

She watched in morbid fascination as Viktor simply widened his stance, assuring himself better stability, as he allowed his choking attacker to struggle.

And then, just as suddenly as it had arisen, the fight drained right out of the aggressor's eyes.

As if sensing this, the seeker loosened his grip, not entirely removing his hand as the other man began coughing.

"You," Spat the man gruffly. " You aren't supposed to be here, Bulgaria."

Blood dripped thickly down his already crooked nose, but Viktor's features were frighteningly calm. "Vou forget," He growled, "That our lord said she was mine."

The assailant's eyes did not blink, his hand stealthily creeping towards where Viktor's wand was sheathed.

Viktor noticed.

With a growl the muscles in his forearms suddenly reacted, his arm yanking the man back from the doorframe, violently slamming him back into it. "Next time you want a trophy," Viktor hissed, voice morphing into something so full of hate that she scarcely recognized it. "I suggest you do something worth rewarding."

Hermione's eyes darkened, and with strength she wasn't sure she had left she rose.

She came from the rear, but the attacker saw her approach.

The man's eyes swiveled to Viktor's, something vindictive shining in them. "You should let me go, Bulgaria."

"Oh, and why's that?"

"Because your prize is about to kill you."

Though she could not see Viktor's face, she clearly heard the conviction his voice tried to feign. "Hermion-own-ninny would never hurt me."

"Care to rethink that?" Came her cutting reply. She watched Viktor's shoulders stiffen upon finding a wand pressed to the back of his neck.

The assailant watched her over his shoulder, eyes dancing in pleasure. "Still so eager to get some quality time in with your prize now, Bulgaria?"

Despite her shaking legs, she managed to hold her balance. Forcing the waver from her voice, she dug the tip farther into his neck. "If you move, I swear you'll never walk again."

Viktor's posture deflated, his hand now resting only loosely against the other man's throat.

The attacker though, simply started laughing.

"You swear he'll never walk? Is that the best you can do, Mudblood?"

Suddenly the pressure around the man's throat was renewed, but through the coughing she caught his next words.

"Bul-garia, h-here..." The man made a choking sound, but the sadistic gleam still shone in his crazed eyes. "Can show you some good curses."

Abruptly Viktor's hand released his grip on the man's neck. "Leave us," He hissed.

"I wouldn't do that," Hermione hissed right back.

Neither man moved, but Hermione's free hand slowly inched down, reaching for Viktor's wand...

In a second Viktor had whorled around, dodging to the side as she let a spell fly at his spinal cord.

The original attacker dropped to the floor, her spell striking the wall where his head had been only a second before.

The edge of Viktor's hand smashed into her wrist, sending her tendons recoiling reflexively, and her wand flying.

The next thing she knew she was the one against the wall, boxed in by Viktor's arms.

His eyes burned intensely. "Vorgive me."

Sputtering for the breath that had been knocked out of her, she defiantly raised her chin. "Forgive a Death Eater?" She practically spat. "Never."

Some of the fire left his eyes, but his voice spared no hatred as he spoke, once again addressing the other man.

"Leave us. Ve have much catching up to do."

The man laughed from his place on the floor. "So that's what they call rape these days? Or is she like all your other Bulgarian whores?"

"This one has more fire," Viktor informed, the pleading look in his eyes strangely at odds with his tone of voice.

"You're both insane!" She gasped out.

"Oh that's rich! You hear that Bulgaria? Your little pet thinks you're insane!"

Viktor's gaze never left hers, but something strange continued to stir in it, unseen to the man on the floor.

"Leave," He stated, his heavily accented words drifting backwards.

"Fine, fine," Snapped the man, rising. "But if you're not supposed to be here..."

"If I wasn't supposed to be here, I would not let you walk away so easily to inform the others."

The attacker cocked his head to the side, smirking.

"Sound logic."

Viktor turned his head, his piercing stare following the other's every move.

"Marcus," He had waited until the last, possible moment before calling out. "If you ever think of attacking me again..." Viktor's threat trailed off, and what was unsaid hung heavily.

But now Hermione had a name to go with the man.

Marcus stood in the doorway's threshold, a flash of anger visible on his face for only a second.

Then his face broke out into a wide smirk, and he gave a curt nod in their general direction as he walked out.

"Have fun, Bulgaria."

As the door swung behind Remus' retreating figure, Harry felt, more than saw, Dumbledore's expression morphing into something far more grave than it had been seconds before.

"Harry," The man's voice reverberated deeply in the quiet room. "I think it's time you explained exactly what happened with Angelina."

Harry's darkened green eyes immediately swept around, locking with the Headmaster's ancient, deep blue gaze.

Something angry was slowly regaining its grip upon him, the sound of the traitor's name rekindling the cinderling anger within him.

His expression hardened considerably. "I would have thought," He stated with unnatural calm, "That Remus would have explained that already."

Dumbledore's expression betrayed no emotion. "Remus relayed that the explanations would be best left to you, Harry."

"Apparently the wolf has joined the Boy Wonder's fan club as well," Snape drawled.

Anger flashed in Harry's malachite eyes. "If having my loved ones systematically murdered one-by-one is what it takes to accumulate one, then you're welcome to it," He stated venomously.

"I believe," Dumbledore interjected, "That enough of past hostilities have been hashed out for one day. Right now, I rather hoped that the both of you were wise enough to understand the need to address more pressing matters."

Snape did not even blink. The anger simply dissolved from his features, a blank mask replacing it.

The Headmaster heaved a weary sigh. "Harry..."

But Harry was already responding. "She's a Death Eater, Headmaster. I found proof of it in Kaylens' memories."

"I saw no such proof within her mind," Snape challenged.

He squeezed his eyes shut, grinding his teeth. "It's there," He ground out.

"Then that girl is as good as a Death Eater herself."

His eyes snapped open. "Kaylens is not..."

"Then how did she come by such knowledge? Or is the great Potter unable to explain that?" Snape spat, sounding almost snakelike.

"I never said it was her memory," Harry snapped frostily. "It was one of the unicorn's. And considering that Angelina was in possession of such hard to come by blood, who would you wager harvested it in the first place?"

Dumbledore heaved another sigh. "Harry, if you would permit me..."

"Go ahead," He answered preemptively, knowing full well that Dumbledore wanted to see it.

A sad smile graced the Headmaster's features, and the elder man slowly raised his wand. Harry unblinkingly met his gaze.

"Legilimens."

In a single, decisive motion, Viktor stepped away from her, kicking the door shut. The candlelight spilling that had been spilling in from the hall fled, draping the room once again in the blackest of shadows.

Hermione did not move. She couldn't. She simply stood, back pressed to the wall, and though her eyes were open the room's impenetrable darkness rendered her incapable of seeing.

Yet her widened pupils never strayed from the spot where Viktor had been standing but a second ago.

"Hermy-owh-ninny." His voice cut through the silence, startling her in spite of herself. "Are you alright?"

Slowly, startlingly, her clenched fists began to shake.

One footstep, followed by another, echoed along the wooden floorboards as he took tentative steps towards her.

"Hermy-owh-ninny?"

Somehow it was this second repetition of her given name that sent the fire within her blazing.

Her entire body was suddenly trembling. "Am I alright?" She hissed. "Am I alright?"

"Lumos."

Viktor's strong, masculine features were abruptly illuminated, far closer to her than she would have liked.

His dark eyes studied her fierce ones. "You are not alright," He whispered, shaking his head. "You look very angry vith me."

She couldn't help it.

She stuttered.

Hermione Granger, witch extraordinaire, stuttered.

Viktor's thick eyebrows slanted down, a perplexed expression crossing his face. "You are taking this vorse than I thought."

Without even realizing it, a coarse laughter began bubbling out of her. "Oh yes, vorse than vou thought," She mimicked. "Well how in the hell did you expect me to take it!?"

"I vas hoping vor the better."

Her bitter laughter caught in her throat.

"How," She whispered, voice dead. "Could you possibly expect anything less than hatred from me?"

The light stemming from his wand flickered, Viktor's eyes wide with pain.

"Hermy-owh-ninny, it is not vhat you think."

Another laugh broke through her. "And to think! All those times..." She fixed him with an icy stare. "Did you know, I actually used to believe you when you said that you thought I was smart."

"You are the most smartest..."

"Then explain to me," She hissed venomously, "Exactly why you expect me to believe the word of a Death Eater."

Again his wand's light flickered, his pained face looking strained. "I am not vith these men because I vant to be."

"Oh?" She queried, eyes wide with feigned interest. "Then how exactly did you wind up with this job?"

He opened his mouth, but was interrupted.

"Let me guess," She continued, biting. "You just sort of fell into it? Quidditch wasn't exciting enough anymore? Decided a little Mudblood cursing was just the ticket?"

His lips became a thin, drawn line. "Don't use that vord."

"Why not? Don't you Death Eaters belittle your victims before you kill them? Or have you not read that far ahead in the handbook?"

"Don't talk like that."

"Forgive me, I must have forgotten that little rule about not mouthing off to my Pureblood betters."

Somewhere along the line, Viktor had begun to shake, the light of his wand vibrating steadily.

"Mi-owh-ninny, stop," He stated pleadingly.

Her brown eyes instantly narrowed. "You are never to call me by that name again. Only my friends have that privilege."

Without warning he shot forward, pressing her to the wall, his hands gripping her upper arms with a palpable desperation. Behind him, somewhere in the now dark room, his wand clattered to the floor.

His hot breath brushed her skin. "Hermy-owh-ninny," He entreated. "Please listen to me. I am here because I could not stand by and watch these excuses of men kill women and children like you and your family. Someone had to do something."

Tilting her chin up, she glared through the darkness. "So you're being noble, is that it?" She hissed through her teeth.

She heard him swallow. "No. But I did not know what else to do. I thought if I could find out information on what these men were doing, then maybe I could put a stop to some of it."

"I'm sure," She replied, almost admiring Voldemort's tactics. Torture her until she almost broke, and then send someone she was once close to in, spouting professions of Order-like aspirations in hopes that she would break, finally spilling explanations regarding the images they had stolen from her mind.

After all, Legilimency could only get one so far. That woman had only been able to extract memories, mere images of the past, but there were no accompanying explanations for them.

And now they had sent Viktor in, undoubtedly with hopes of tricking her into explaining some of the more obscure ones.

Like the one from this summer, when her parents had dropped her off in the middle of the seedier part of London, only for her to be met by Alastor Moody and Mrs. Weasley.

The two adults had taken her, by foot, to Grimmauld Place, just as they had the preceding summer. But the Fidelius charm protecting it had prevented the Death Eater from seeing the precise location their footsteps had taken. In fact, the Fidelius charm prevented the Death Eater from viewing anything that had occurred within a block of where the old Black family manor sat, let alone anything that had happened within its walls.

Oh how that had pissed the Death Eater off.

"Viktor, tell me," She said sweetly. "If what you just said were true, wouldn't it have occurred to you to have put a silencing charm on the room so your little Lord and Master's followers couldn't overhear your confessions of treachery?"

Her eyes were slowly adjusting, and though she could scarcely see him, she was able to make out the determined line of his jaw.

"He-Vho-Must-Not-Be-Named has already put a silencing charm upon this room."

Her eyebrows arched skeptically. "Isn't it just like a good little Death Eater to trust that vile man's word."

Again, he swallowed audibly. "Hermy-owh-ninny, I stood outside this very room when they were torturing you." He paused, voice sounding overcome with emotion. "I would have vent to you, Hermy-owh-ninny, but I did not know what was going on at the time. I was unable to hear a single thing, so I know there is a silencing charm already on this room."

She scoffed, steeling herself for what she was about to say. "And you don't think your Lord has ways of breaking that charm when it suits his purposes?"

Viktor sucked in his breath, sending an oddly satisfied feeling coursing through her.

"Ah, didn't think of that now did we?" She taunted.

For a moment he stood there. Just stood there, his chest rising and falling against her own, his scent permeating her senses just as it had years ago.

And then he was stepping back, reclaiming his wand, and firing off silencing charms in every conceivable direction.

Still trying to reclaim her breath, she folded her arms in a vain attempt to portray her thoughts.

She wasn't about to fall for his act.

Dumbledore stepped away, wiping his forehead. "Thank you, Harry."

Shaking off the disorientation that always accompanied Legilimency, Harry managed a weak reply.

"Anytime."

Snape, to his credit, had managed to keep up his glower for the duration of his and Dumbledore's exchange, and was practically tapping his foot in impatience.

"Well?"

If possible, the lines of Dumbledore's face seemed somehow deeper.

"It's true, Severus. Angelina, at the very least, helped Death Eaters to harvest unicorn blood for him. She bore the mark that night as well."

"I've never seen her amongst his ranks," Snape countered indignantly. "It has to be a false memory that Potter concocted."

Harry let out a barking laugh. "A minute ago weren't you proclaiming my incompetency in this?"

"So it wasn't your work!" Snape sneered triumphantly. "You admit it!"

"No," Harry growled. "But if you think I can't even construct a simple wall then how in the hell do you expect me to fabricate false images good enough to fool Dumbledore of all people?"

A vein in Snape's temple began twitching, an abnormally red hue beginning to overtake his features.

"Well Severus," Dumbledore responded, looking rather flattered. "He's got you there."

Snape's wand arm began twitching as well.

The Headmaster's searching gaze studied Snape, almost disappointedly. In the end the wisest man Harry had ever met said nothing. He simply sighed, turning a searching sky blue gaze to him.

And it was right then that Mad Eye Moody entered, closely followed by a rather alert looking Tonks, and a man whose features were oddly blurred.

But it was the sight of the bound Angelina walking between them that sent Harry's muscles tensing.

His jade orbs instantly darkened, his voice coming out in a dangerous hiss.

"You," He growled.

Angelina's face flooded with guilt, and Tonks nudged her farther into the room. Instantly Harry found himself following her every move like a predator, his gaze scanning the traitor up and down to ensure that no weaponry resided upon her personage.

Dark curses could still be inflicted with bound hands. He had proven that only a day ago, and he wasn't willing to let anyone in the room suffer the same consequences of inattention that Dolohov had. The image of the man writhing on the floor, losing his sanity amongst the wreckage of the Three Broomsticks, was something that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

And he had done that to him.

Tonks, as if just noticing him, flashed him a broad grin.

"Wotcher, Harry."

If he had not been so fixated on the dark events of yesterday, his most basic of animal instincts beginning to activate, he might have found her joviality funny. As it was, he could only manage a grunt in greeting.

With a slam of finality, the door to the room swung shut. Moody instantly turned, casting several silencing and privacy charms upon it.

"Never know who might be listenin' out there," Moody warned, tapping what was left of his ear vigorously.

The blurry looking man cast an odd look in Moody's general direction, before turning with a regal air towards the Headmaster.

"Maybe now someone can explain why we have been babysitting this girl," He said in a twisted voice, flipping a hand towards Angelina. "Who for some reason is tied up like an Azkaban-bound war criminal."

"I certainly hope," Snape drawled with slitted eyes. "That criminals worthy of that isle are secured better than she."

The unidentifiable man snorted something that sounded distinctly like, "You would know."

Snape drew himself up to his full height, eyes narrowed. "Who exactly do you presume to be?"

Moody's good eye darted between Severus and the blurred man, his magical eye remaining on where Angelina stood on the other side of the room, eyes carefully averted to the floor.

"Someone whose identity I would prefer to remain anonymous, for the moment," Dumbledore supplied, with an air of finality.

The Potion Master grunted in acquiescence, maintaining a suspicious glare on the stranger, who had taken to waggling his eyebrows tauntingly in Snape's direction.

Even as Harry watched this, for the life of him he couldn't declare what color the man's eyebrows were. It was as if every feature of the man were simultaneously present, yet muted beyond recognition. Harry could look at him, while still not seeing him.

And somehow he knew that the obscurity had nothing to do with his missing glasses.

"Considering Potter's newest revelations regarding treachery," Snape snarled, breaking into his thoughts. "Isn't it a bit risky to be letting a stranger with a cloaking charm be privy to our conversation?"

"I trust him, Severus," Dumbledore stated.

Snape's jaw tightened, but he uttered not another word on the matter. Moody, on the otherhand, fixed Harry with a definite stare.

"Heard you were the one to unmask the wench. Good work, Potter."

Tonks suddenly looked furious. "Ange is the traitor! That's why her hands are tied?!"

Harry growled in affirmation.

The hue of Tonks' face suddenly increased, the tips of her hair rapidly reddening. "And here I thought it was just Moody's paranoia..."

"If you've any in stock," Moody suggested gutterly, sending Tonks an annoyed look. "Then we could expediate things and force some Verisiterum down her throat."

"I doubt that will be necessary," Dumbledore informed.

The Auror looked distinctly unsatisfied. "Traitors never talk willingly, Albus. But if we're out of truth serum, I suppose we could do things the old fashioned way. Potter here could do with a lesson on creative means of extracting information."

Angelina paled considerably.

"Alastor, that won't be necessary," The Headmaster restated, tempering the frighteningly hopeful expression on Moody's scarred and twisted face.

"I didn't tell them anything."

Everyone's heads bolted towards her, as Angelina's carefully articulated, measured words filled the room.

Moody scoffed, and to Harry's surprise, turned his good eye on him. "That there is a classic line Potter. They always start off with it. I suggest you take notes."

"How long have you been spying on the Order?" Snape demanded, cutting right to the point. "And how much have you told him about our activities?"

Angelina, having been released from Tonks' grip, backed away towards the far wall. "N-nothing," She stammered. "I told them I wasn't trusted enough to have learned anything of value."

For once Harry's inner thoughts echoed Snapes spoken ones.

"Surely," Snape drawled, "You don't expect us to believe that. I know how this game works. You had to of given them something."

"I s-swear..."

Moody turned a gnarled grin back on him. "Notice the stammering, Potter? A common tactic for eliciting sympathy. Don't be fooled though, it's really all a load of..."

"I only told them two things!" Angelina interjected, before the sadistic gleam in Moody's eye could grow any further. "I told them I knew where the Kaylens girl was going to be. I promised to supply a steady flow of blood samples for them."

"And the seco..."

An angry, animalistic sound resounded from the doorway, cutting Snape off.

Remus had returned, and had been in time to hear Angelina's statement.

Now the werewolf bore a furious expression Harry had never seen before.

"Do you have any idea," Remus questioned icily, stalking forward. "Of what they could have done to Kally if her blood was infused with dark magic?"

Angelina's head bobbed regretfully. "I do," She confessed.

"Angie," Tonks spoke up, sounding stunned despite her grim expression. "You really would have went through with it? She's only sixteen..."

"Seventeen," Remus corrected.

Angelina's dark throat rose and fell shamefully.

"Yes," She whispered shakily. "But...he said..."

"Who said?" Harry shot out, beginning to breath rather fast.

His former teammate visibly flinched. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He said he just n-needed it for his experiments. He said he wouldn't hurt her."

"And you believed him," Harry snarled.

"Nice form Potter," Moody complimented. "Keeping your comments pointed and cynical is precisely how us Aurors start off. And if that doesn't work..."

Angelina's dark eyes caught the way Moody fingered his wand.

"I had no reason not to believe him," She whispered.

Harry snorted. "Oh yes, because the self-proclaimed, hypocritical, lord of the purebloods is most assuredly trustworthy!" He countered cuttingly. "What reason would you have not to believe a murdering bastard?"

Moody exchanged a glance with the still slightly stunned looking Tonks. "He's pretty good at this isn't he?"

"Harry," Angelina plead chokingly. "You don't understand..."

"You're damn right I don't," He replied with deadly calm. "I don't understand how someone could turn their back on good people in favor of a pompous half-blood who takes a sadistic amount of delight in killing innocent people."

The Healer-in-training held his lethal stare for as long as she could, before breaking away to look at the others desperately.

There was no sympathy to be found in any of their gazes.

The girl's dark throat rose and fell, her ebony skin reflecting the light in what would have been a charming way, had Harry not been contemplating wringing her throat.

For a long time the traitor simply stood there, her shaky breathing the room's only sound.

Finally, after an indeterminable wait, she began talking. Her voice so quiet that at first, it was hard to hear.

"He's been experimenting for awhile now," She whispered. "He's brilliant..."

"Can I hex her?" Tonks asked, looking shockingly serious.

Angelina's watery eyes darted up. "I meant he's more than capable of achieving whatever his goals are. It's less a compliment than a fact."

Snape waved a hand dismissively, urging her to go on.

The girl drew in a deep breath, and continued.

"I was always good in Potions, which is why I was recruited in the first place. But, he's trying to harness the magical abilities of other species for himself. Can you imagine what it would be like? To have the immortality of a vampire? The resistance to stunning spells of a giant? Or a Veela's ability to manipulate others by appeal alone?"

"Surprise, surprise," Harry drawled. "Voldemort's power hungry. Who would have thought?"

Angelina jerked, as if struck. "I'm n-not," She stammered. "I'm not sure how far he's progressed in other areas. But I think he's already figured out how to transfer a unicorn's healing powers. But I don't know how..."

"Does that have anything to do with what you did to Kalliandra?" Remus demanded.

She bit her lip, shaking her head. "No. That was entirely my idea."

Harry jolted forward, only stopped by the restraining hand that suddenly appeared on his shoulder.

He threw a furious glance back at whomever had dared stop him from extracting revenge on Kaylens' behalf, and was surprised to see that it had been Remus. Only his father's friend was completely ignoring him, his serious stare focused across the room as Angelina continued.

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named doesn't know I did this. I hadn't even planned this until today. But if he found out, I imagine he'd kill me."

"And what a horrible loss that would be," Harry snarled, shaking in anger.

Remus' firm, vice like squeeze on his shoulder stopped him from saying anything else.

Surprisingly Angelina's dark eyes rose, fixing him with a meaningful stare. "I had my reasons for doing what I did."

He practically felt Remus growl behind him. "What reason could you possibly have for desiring to drive a young girl to insanity?"

"That wasn't my intent..."

"Then what did you expect to happen?" Snape queried sarcastically, sounding mildly curious.

Her features twisted painfully. "I can't say..."

"Why. Not." Harry spat.

But the girl's eyes never wavered from his challenging stare. "Because it could endanger her if I did."

Both Moody and Tonks instantly looked confused.

"Elaborate," Snape ordered.

Angelina shook her head stubbornly. "I won't."

A vicious, maniacal grin bent Moody's face. "And I was beginning to think I wouldn't get to interrogate anyone properly today." He gestured with a gnarled hand. "Watch closely Potter. You're about to get a lesson in interrogation techniques."

"Alastor," Dumbledore warned.

The admonishment did little to subdue Moody's gleeful expression. "Come on Albus, it's just retribution. Nothing she doesn't have coming to her."

To Harry's astonishment, Angelina turned a little green. Her normally vibrant lips parted, as she began to stutter.

"W-wait. I know I d-deserve it but there's more."

Moody grinned like a viper. "See that Potter? They'll start talking when you can practically smell their fear."

Angelina grimaced. "That's not why I'm..."

Moody guffawed. The paranoid Auror retiree actually guffawed.

It was strangely frightening.

Her next words came out in a fast, barely intelligible string.

"He wants to shape shift like a Metamorphmagus, and he wants Tonks."

An icy shiver crawled down Harry's spine at the sound Remus emitted at that statement.

"What?"

Angelina Johnson, whom he had once thought to be a brave Gryffindor to the core, shuddered fearfully.

"Tonks, I'm so sorry..."

"Was that the second thing you told them?" Tonks interjected, looking thoroughly perplexed. "You only mentioned Kally earlier."

At this the girl lowered her head, her long, dark hair falling forward to obscure her face.

"Yes," She whispered quietly. "He's after you too. You're the only Metamorphmagus we know of and I had to promise to bring them something."

From behind him Remus spoke, his tone as dark as he had ever heard it.

"And did you bring them anything?"

Angelina gulped visibly. "Y-yes. The attack at Phoenix Park...when Tonks was unconscious afterwards I..."

"You stole my blood and gave it to him!" Tonks spluttered, sounding stunned.

"I said I was sorry," Angelina choked out. "But he promised not to hurt you or the girl. He doesn't have her blood though. I wasn't able to give him the vials before..."

She trailed off, and Harry remembered something with a dark chill.

The Detreck brother he had failed to kill...the one that had found them in the clearing...he had taken Kalliandra's blood..."

"He does have her blood," Harry choked out. "Last night, when we were stranded, Death Eaters ambushed us. One of them was able to take some blood from Kaylens before I could..."

He was too angry with himself to finish the thought.

"I'll begin working on protective potions for the girls post-haste," Snape filled the silence, sounding infuriatingly calm. "I am intimately familiar with the methods he might choose to use against them, and have ways of countering them."

Dumbledore nodded his appreciation. "Thank you, Severus."

For an inexplicable reason, Harry felt a rush of gratitude towards the infuriating Potions Master.

But it was tempered by a flare of anger, as the conversation with Angelina continued.

Tonks was still staring at the girl as if she had never seen her before. "Say the Dark Tosser does find a way to gain my morphing abilities. Then what do you think will happen?"

"I don't know," Angelina whispered.

Moody laughed, his wooden leg tapping on the floor as he tottered back and forth. "I'll tell you what would happen you ignorant buffoon! He'd be able to walk right into the Ministry and start killing people! So tell me girlie, are you proud knowing that they might happen?"

"My God," Remus suddenly said. "If they figured it was a Metamorphmagus who had done the killings, Tonks would be the first one blamed..."

The rest of Tonks' hair turned red, her eyes narrowing into thin slits. "How could you Ange?" She asked, accusation dripping from every word.

Angelina took a step back, looking like a deer in headlights. "I didn't have a choice."

A growl rose unbidden from Harry's throat. "There's always a choice," He seethed. "You were just too cowardly to make the right one."

She was beginning to look like a hounded animal. "You don't know what it's like," She stammered, scurrying behind the couch. "They threatened my family, my friends...everyone I ever loved! Even Fred! I..."

"Fred would have preferred the risk over you joining that vile snake," Harry hissed, feeling angry on her boyfriend's behalf. Once Fred found out...

He would be devastated.

The menacing sound of wood on wood filled the air, as Moody began to slowly advance on the cowering girl.

He saw it before Moody did. Angelina's backwards advance had not been random, or an act of fear. Instead she had been closing in on the incredibly silent and blurred man, getting as near to him as possible.

Harry moved at the same time she did.

She got there first, tackling the man behind the couch and out of the line of easy spell fire. An undignified grunt resounded through the room, and Tonks, Remus, Dumbledore, Snape, and Moody all moved at once.

But Harry had been closer.

He launched himself forward, toppling over the back of the settee and onto the two flailing figures.

He hit their bony bodies hard and awkwardly, and his momentum sent him rolling off of them.

But not before his strong arm had lashed out, wrapping around Angelina's shoulders from behind and taking her with him.

She screamed, throwing her head backwards and into his face.

The cracking of cartilage was followed by a groan of pain as his nose cracked. His vision blurred, burning white, yet he maintained his grip.

And then a foot shot out, and a well placed kick drove the wind right out of Angelina's lungs, her legs reflexively curling up as she doubled over right there on the floor.

Harry was on all fours, flipping her over and pouncing in an instant.

Her entire body shook, recoiling with the racking coughs that attacked her, and Harry had time to pin her while the unnamed man bound her feet as well.

"Ph-phanks," Harry gasped through the pain, knowing full well that it had been the cloaked man who had helped him.

The man stood, brushing his hands off with a disgusted expression as he surveyed his handy-work.

"Anytime, kid."

Harry still didn't move, his eyes blazing down in anger at the deceitful wench. And slowly, without even realizing it, his hand moved to her throat, applying just enough pressure to send her eyes wide in recognition.

"Harry, that is not necessary."

He didn't bother looking at the Headmaster as he spoke. "All pha same, lbe ratha nah shance it."

Tonks walked around Angelina's pinned form, dropping down behind her head so that she was staring him right in the face.

"Accident prone eh, Harry?" She said with forced cheer, in a clear attempt to diffuse the situation.

Harry merely grunted, watching as Angelina's gasps to reclaim air slowly slowed as she caught her breath.

"Hold still a second," Tonks was muttering. "I'm no Pomfrey but I've had my share of accidents."

He snorted, then immediately wished he hadn't as pain blazed through him.

"Alright," Tonks said tentatively. "This may hurt a bit."

He hardly had time to register the 'bit' part before she mouthed a quick spell at him, followed by a shot of pain so acute that it was clearly worse than the actual 'breaking' part had been.

"Th-thanks," He sputtered, tasting the coppery taste of blood upon his tongue.

Tonks smiled dourly. "No problem."

"You can let go of her now, Harry."

Once again Harry did not look at the Headmaster, he simply re-narrowed his eyes.

"Not likely," He stated grimly.

"What are you going to do, Harry," Angelina asked hoarsely. "Strangle me?"

He gritted his teeth. "The thought has crossed my mind."

"Nice idea, Potter," Said Moody approvingly. "And we haven't even gotten to the physical interrogation lesson either."

"Throttling her does sound good," Tonks mused, leaning back on her hands.

"I concur," Grumbled the blurry man, looking extremely disgruntled at having been bowled over.

A flicker of fear passed through Angelina's eyes. "Harry, please...I didn't have a choice..."

"We've been over this," He scowled, wiping blood away with his wrist. "You had one. You just made the wrong one."

Under his hand he felt her swallow. "You don't know what it's like," She whispered. "He threatened to kill my family. You've never had one. You don't know what it's like to love someone enough to..."

"You're right!" He roared, suddenly losing his patience. "I don't! Which is why killing you won't weigh too heavily on my conscience!"

Tonks, directly in front of him, looked rather shocked at his sudden outburst.

"Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. Too calmly. "You are not a killer."

He nearly laughed, thinking of he and Kaylens' escapades over the past 24 hours. Between the two of them they had quite the body count.

"Don't be so sure of that," He informed coldly, fixing his present hostage with a meaningful stare.

"You're wrong...you're not," Angelina choked out, prompting him to tighten the pressure around her throat.

"Care to test that?" He threatened. "I've already killed twice. At this point one more won't hurt."

Her bound hands made an attempt to claw at her neck, but he simply swatted them down with his free arm.

Dumbledore seemed undeterred. "You're not Harry."

His head pivoted to the side, the pressure against Angelina's neck never relaxing. "Care to tell that to Broussard Detreck?" He tossed out challengingly.

The twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes sputtered, and though his expression remained impassive it was clear from his eyes that he no longer recognized the man in front of him. Harry's tone had been so cold...

A disbelieving expression befell Lupin. "Harry," He whispered, shocked. "You wouldn't..."

His jade eyes shone malevolently. "Not would, did."

"Pray tell, what gave you the impression that you had the right to play executioner?" Snape questioned, not bothering to mask his disdain.

"Forgive me," Harry snipped. "But when somebody tries to kill me more than once I tend to get a little angry. Tripping over my roommate's dead body was just the last straw."

"You can't just get away with killing people, Potter."

"Really?" He asked, dripping sarcasm. "I was under the impression that I already had."

"Potter," Moody said seriously. "Can anyone prove it was you? Did you leave behind anything that could link you to the scene?"

He shook his head in the negative. "How daft do you think I am?"

If possible, Moody's distorted brow wrinkled in thought. Tonks just looked impressed.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, sounding every bit his age. "There are better ways to incapacitate one's enemies. Killing is not something I ever wished for you."

"It's not like you have much choice in the matter," Harry replied seriously. "Considering that there's a Dark Lord who wants my head on a platter."

"Potter!" Snape bellowed. "How dare you..."

"Dare I what?" Harry countered. "Not buy in to the 'All Death Eaters are Capable of Reformation Club?'"

A dark look twisted Snape's expression. "So is precious Potter going to save the whole wide world from all the big bad Death Eater's?" He mocked.

"No," Harry bit back, "That would be giving them entirely too much credit. Personally I like to take it one country at a time."

"It may be a little late for that," Remus informed.

His eyes blazed a burning trail across the room, but he did not miss the sharp look Dumbledore threw the werewolf.

"What is it that you're not telling me?" Harry demanded.

"Something happened in Dublin."

His head jolted back towards the speaker, whom was doing an admirable job of ignoring Snape's exasperated look.

"I risk life and limb to gain that information, and the first thing you do you insolent girl is to blab it to the first teenager who asks?"

If Harry hadn't known better, he'd have expected Snape to begin spouting fire.

Tonks seemed unflummoxed. "He'd find out in a few days time with everyone else anyway. Besides, Harry deserves to know what's going on."

"That was not your decision to make..."

Snape's roar was cut off by Dumbledore's sharp voice. "I agree with her, Severus."

The greasy haired man looked aghast. "What!?"

"I agree," Dumbledore restated. "I simply would have rather addressed it later. Preferably when Harry was not perched atop someone whom he was threatening to kill."

"I didn't threaten to kill her," Harry corrected. "I simply pointed out that it was a possibility."

"Don't interrupt the boy's negotiating tactics, Albus." Moody commented. "He's doing marvelous."

The unidentifiable man snorted.

"Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. "I promise that I will explain everything to you, if you can be patient enough to wait a few hours. I'd prefer to know more before I relay everything."

He felt his brow crinkle, his anger subsiding ever-so-slightly at the revelation that Dumbledore was actually going to tell him something he wanted to know. Even if it meant having to wait a few hours.

Snape, however, seemed incapable of dropping the previous subject.

"You forgot to answer me, Potter."

Harry didn't even bother looking at the infuriating man. "Actually you are quite mistaken. I didn't forget anything. I simply refuse to engage in conversation with anyone I deem less interesting than an amoeba."

Snape let out a strangled, strangely dog-like sound.

Harry actually glanced up at this. "Down boy. No need to work yourself up."

Snape's wand was nearly out before Dumbledore halted him.

Off to the side, Remus was attempting to shove a fist in his mouth.

That was right up until Snape's next statement.

"You're a murderer, Potter."

The small burst of laughter that had been bubbling out of Tonks died a quick death at the black look that had crossed over Harry's features.

Struggling to regain control of himself so as not to choke the life from Angelina, he sucked a hot breath in through gritted teeth.

"Then that must make you twice as bad, considering I only killed in self defense," Harry informed calmly, rage flashing in Snape's eyes.

"Of course," Harry continued. "I'm also of the opinion that anyone ignorant enough to let that mark be burnt into their flesh willingly ought to get what's coming to them."

"Harry," Dumbledore suddenly cut in. "I'm not entirely sure I like where your thought process is going."

"I didn't expect you to," He replied honestly.

"Did it every occur to you, in that overly inflated head of yours," Snape hissed, "That information cannot be extracted from dead bodies."

"And where would you propose we keep them? So long as a Death Eater is alive, they're dangerous," Harry countered.

Snape looked livid, but Harry was not done. Not nearly.

"You know what? Never mind." He stated, as if thinking aloud. "Maybe the merciful, spare-all stance that the Order has been taking is right. I must be wrong. So let's keep just stunning the Death Eaters so we can send them to Azkaban and pump them for information. After all, we all know how safe that fortress is. This summer's mass break out taught us that much."

He paused, breathing harshly. "So hell, lets keep considering Azkaban a viable option. Why not? Then when there's another major breakout and another student, maybe Ginny this time, gets killed, then we can all honestly say that we didn't see it coming."

His deadpan was met with silence.

It was Remus who finally broke it.

"Harry," he began. "I know what you're going through. I know what it's like to want someone dead. But killing indiscriminately isn't the answer."

Looking over his shoulder, renewing the pressure against Angelina's throat, Harry fixed Lupin with a pointed stare. "You're right. But I'd hardly say it was indiscriminate."

"The boy's right."

Moody had finally spoken up.

"I never kill unless it's necessary. But it's getting to the point where there are just too many of them. If we try to spare all of their lives it'll only lead to more casualties on our side." Moody shook his scarred,

wrinkled head. "The Death Eater's have had this coming for awhile. It's time we started fighting fire with fire."

Dumbledore sighed tiredly. "Now is really not the time for this discussion."

"Then when is?" Moody asked, a portrait of seriousness.

Harry tuned out their conversation, redirecting his attention back to Angelina. She had already caused enough damage, and had attempted escape. A futile attempt, but nevertheless an attempt.

So what to do with her?

Tonks scooted forward on the floor, hesitantly, until she was almost nose-to-nose with him.

"Well Harry," She breathed with a trace of a smile. "Are we going to throttle her or not? I don't feel like waiting around all night."

He scowled at her, teasing his fingers around Angelina's throat. "Not sure," He replied staidly. "Unless of course, there's anything else she'd like to tell us?"

Both of them glanced down at Angelina.

Terror swarmed in the trapped girl's eyes.

"Well Ange? You heard the man! We haven't got all day and you've been awfully quiet."

Spying the slightly unhinged look in Tonks' eyes, as if she were just itching to curse someone, Angelina managed to formulate a reply.

"I've told you everything."

Harry interrupted her, a thought that had never really left coming back to his mind's forefront. "Not really. You've yet to explain why you did this to Kaylens."

Tonks glanced up at him, before turning her hovering gaze back down.

Angelina grimaced. "Telling you that would reveal things about her that I don't want others hearing."

Harry's expression morphed into one of blatant derision. "Really? If it's her 'condition' that you're referring to I'd have to inform you that Tonks is already aware of it."

Unsure of his bold statement, he glanced at the Auror for confirmation. She arched an eyebrow in amusement, nodding.

"There are others..." Angelina hissed quietly, forcing the two of them to lean closer to hear. "That work for the Ministry present."

And just like that, Harry understood what she was getting at.

"Got any charms to prevent them from hearing us?" He questioned Tonks, but the Auror was already casting a privacy charm around the three of them.

For the briefest of seconds, Angelina looked almost relieved.

Right up until she found both of their wands at her throat.

"Talk," Harry ordered. "Now."

The girl nodded vigorously. "The girl's a Reach."

"Thanks for stating the obvious, Ange. Got anything for us that we don't already know," Tonks asked, raising a challenging eyebrow.

"I wasn't lying when I said I didn't have a choice. But that choice wasn't from Voldemort."

Harry clenched his fist around his wand, adrenaline still coursing through his veins.

"Care to expand on that," He inquired.

Angelina attempted to gesture, only to find her hands driven hard against the floor by Harry's knee.

Her face cringed. "I know what I did was risky," She croaked. "But the girl was going to die."

"That isn't written in stone," Harry snarled, his insides twisting painfully.

Angelina, surprisingly, looked him right in the eye.

"I'm a Healer-in-Training, Harry. I know the signs."

The hard, fearful edge to her voice was oddly absent. In its place was a wavering sadness that Harry felt all too acutely.

"That's why I gave Kalliandra the injection. I wanted..." She turned away, her ebony features drooping. "Damn't Harry, I wanted her to have a chance. She was going to die if something didn't change. No one will say it, but that's the hard truth."

Fury at what his former team and housemate had done was acutely present, but for some reason he found himself listening to her words very carefully.

"She was too young to die that way, Tonks," She continued, rolling her eyes up to look at the upside-down head of the Auror. "I thought that if insanity didn't take her, then the healing properties of a unicorn's blood could save her."

Harry's malachite eyes widened into a stunned, unblinking stare.

Why hadn't he thought of that?

Beneath where he straddled her waist, he felt Angelina's diaphragm contract as she kept talking. "I did an experiment first, to see if there was a chance it would work. There was, so I did it."

Tonks' dark, critical gaze moved back and forth, between Harry and Angelina, watching the tension slowly drain from the situation.

And then, very carefully, Harry nodded.

"This doesn't mean I trust you."

Angelina Johnson swallowed hard. "I don't blame you."

And then Harry slowly moved off of her, leaving Tonks to quickly stun her.

Outside the privacy bubble, Dumbledore shook his head, relieved at what he was seeing.

Standing next to him, Snape pinched his nose tiredly. "I should've just got the Veritaserum," He bemoaned.

The unidentifiable man let out a Slytherin-like scoff. "And miss all the fun? You've gone soft in your old age, Severus."

Snape's penetrating gaze swiveled to the man. "Who exactly, in a frozen over hell, are you?"

For a second the man looked rather gleeful. "Consider me a ghost from the past."

"Just call him Casper," Tonks informed loudly, the privacy bubble clearly gone. "He likes it."

Remus let out a low chuckle as the man shot a malevolent glare at the young Auror.

"Why what a marvelous nickname," Dumbledore said aloud. "Now Harry, Tonks, why don't we continue this tomorrow. I somehow think this would go quicker under the influence of one of Severus' concoctions."

Suddenly realizing that the hostage was no longer conscious, his brow crinkled.

"Perhaps having her awake would aid the process as well,"
Dumbledore added.

Remus groaned. "This has been too long a night."

"Hate to break it to you, but it's barely evening, Wolfmeister."

Upon hearing Tonks' nickname Remus groaned even louder. "At this point the days are just blending together," He muttered.

Behind them, the tell-tale sound of a wooden peg dancing around exhibited Mad Eye's glee.

"Potter," He exclaimed maniacally. "We are going to have quite a time training you!"

Tonks expression grew panicked, and out of the corner of her mouth she immediately began hissing.

"Don't let him! He trained me, and his idea of fun is torture."

Harry barely heard anyone. Instead he found his feet leading him out of the room.

He was exhausted, and he knew exactly where he was going.

Hermione watched as the blue-gray light of the various silencing charms died down. Now, a new, softer light emitted from Viktor's wand as he murmured another Lumos.

"If he overheard me then we do not have much time," He said hurriedly.

Not much time...for what? She thought, feeling something inside her begin fluttering with dread.

Merlin, that other man had said she was some sort of prize. She had heard rumors regarding what Death Eaters did with their human trophies.

She swallowed hard. "Of course," She muttered, forcing the fear from her voice. "I nearly forgot that I was your little prize."

She watched his reaction carefully. And while the seriousness did not leave Viktor's face, his eyes softened, as if he knew what she was afraid of.

"I would never use you for something like that," He whispered sincerely.

He remained standing apart from her, as if rooted to that single spot. The light from his wand was so scant that his bulky figure was partially obscured, his lower legs and feet disappearing in shadows.

Only his face was properly illuminated, and she was able to see the pained expression crisscrossing his features.

"Hermy-owh-ninny, there is an attack being planned on a Phoenix. And they are planning it with information they got from you."

"What?" The word escaped her lips before she could stop herself.

Viktor's intense eyes bored through the few yards separating them, as if he could will her trust with only his gaze. "Mi-owh-ninny, I was able to overhear something about a location of this Phoenix. They found an approximate location inside your head. Please, tell me what they saw. There may still be time to send warning to it, because it is in danger."

Something about this seemed wrong. Incredibly, undeniably wrong. The Death Eater that had attacked her mind had not been able to find out anything about the Order from her. Thanks to Dumbledore's Fidelius Charm there wasn't a single thing the woman had been able to access about it within her mind.

So how did they even know it existed?

Her chest rose, attempting to draw in breath that did not come. It was as if ice water had suddenly flooded her veins. The Order's Headquarters was so well protected, and yet...

The raw intensity of Viktor's voice was enough to make her question everything.

"Hermion-ninny, we have to help it. Please tell me where this Phoenix is at. I may be able to do something."

Regaining the capacity to again breathe, a cool breath suddenly filled her lungs.

She fixed him with a deadly stare.

"No." The word rolled furiously off her lips, the full weight of Viktor's betrayal crashing down upon her.

"Please! This Phoenix is in trouble! You must know that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is looking for magical species for his experiments. He wants a Phoenix. I do not know why, but I would think he is trying to make himself immortal."

Her brow instantly creased. The Phoenix? He thought this was all over some magical bird!

His naivety sparked a treacherous thought within her. What if he was telling the truth? If he had never known the Order existed, he would truly have thought that there was no one doing anything to fight back against Voldemort. Maybe he really had gone rogue.

Despite her better judgment, every fiber of her being wanted desperately to believe him, and yet...

It was all a ruse. It had to be. A clever trick of that vile Muggle-hating man. Voldemort could have asked Viktor to aid him in tricking her into giving up the Order's information, and if she did...

"Hermion-ninny?"

Never had her name sounded as dismal as it did right then when Viktor spoke it.

"I know you do not trust me right now..."

Her dark eyes shot up, a thousand thoughts flying through her addled mind.

"Trust you? Trust you!?" She loudly proclaimed, sounding slightly hysterical. "How utterly unfathomable! You must find it very unfair that I don't trust you, considering all the ground work you've laid, trying to earn it."

Raw pain flashed across his silhouetted face, but she was far from done with this feeling out session.

She needed to know whether or not he was telling the truth, and for the life of her the only plan she could formulate was to scream at him, and to gauge his reaction afterwards.

Faking the anger was simply not necessary.

"So tell me," She continued. "When we first met at Hogwarts, did V-volde..." Her breath came in ragged gasps as she fought to regain control of herself. "Did that vile man recruit you for the sole reason of trying to earn my trust even back then, or were you already on more than a Quidditch roster?"

"Hermy-owh-ninny," His voice held an unnatural note in it. "Can you remain silent vor un minute? Ve may not haff much time. So please, try to listen."

She choked back a hysterical laugh, but he was already going on.

"I need to know vhat they found out vhen they entered vour mind. It is very important vor you to try and remember."

She shook her head, sending her untamable hair everywhere.

"So what that woman forcibly extracted from my mind wasn't enough to satiate your pathetic lord's need for information?"

Viktor's expansive chest rose and fell in a heavy sigh. "I know you do not trust me right now." He repeated. "You do not have much reason to. But your options are a bit limited now. If you can help me, I may be able to prevent him from capturing this Phoenix."

She scarcely heard him. The crease in her brow deepened, and she racked her mind for a possible way that the Death Eaters could have found out about the Order from her.

"They said something about wanting to hurt the Muggles in the area, to draw the Phoenix out of its hiding place. I did not understand why a bird would be hiding, but..."

A cold feeling suddenly overtook her.

To draw the Phoenix out...

It was amazing. How a few simple words could send her heart pounding so hard that it felt as if it would tear from her chest at any second.

In the wake of the Hogsmeade attack the students might have been sent home.

And if they had...

Ron, Ginny, and Harry would be at Headquarters.

None of them would be content to remain within the safe confines of the Order's Headquarters if Muggles were being tortured in the surrounding streets. They were far too brave for that.

And the female Death Eater had extracted an approximate location from her head, when she had seen Hermione's Muggle parents dropping her off a few blocks away that past summer.

After that memory, things had gotten blurry for the Death Eater, and the woman had been enraged.

Somehow the woman had put it all together, realizing precisely why things had gone blurry within Hermione's mind.

Because the Order's location was nearby.

"Oh God!" The choked sound that tore from her throat was scarcely recognizable as human, but suddenly she understood.

The Order was in danger. And it was entirely her fault.

Rough, calloused hands suddenly wrapped tightly around her shoulders. "Hermy-owh-ninny. Please, you must tell me. Tell me now."

Looking up into his intense eyes that begged her to trust him, Hermione realized that for the first time in her life her knowledge couldn't help her make the right decision.

For once she'd have to go with her gut.

Dean Thomas stood at the base of the stairway leading to the virtually vacant girl's dormitory, screaming his head off.

It was virtually vacant because one Ginny Weasley still resided there. And it was her attention that he was trying to get.

"GINNY! Please talk to me!"

From behind him he heard footsteps descending the boy's dormitories, followed by a loud sigh and Neville's tired sounding voice.

"She still won't come down?"

Dean's dark eyes remained narrowed in frustration.

"No."

Cautiously Neville walked forward, coming to stand next to him. Several minutes passed in silence, before Neville again spoke, almost startling him.

"She's going to be alright. The isolation...it's a part of grieving."

Listening to his roommates words, he found himself unable to respond for some time. Finally, as if on autopilot, he felt himself nodding stiffly.

"I'm worried about her," He managed.

An awkward look crossed Neville's face, unseen by Dean, as the last of the Longbottom line raised a hand, placing it on his dorm mate's shoulder.

"Just give her time. She's a lot stronger than she looks."

Hearing this, Dean grimaced, recalling something Ginny had once told him.

"Don't I know it," He responded quietly. There was so much that Neville simply didn't know, and yet...

Somehow the quiet boy understood. For the past day Dean had slowly been coming to the realization that despite Neville's tendency to have remained in the background over the past few years, that there was very little that the guy missed.

Never in a million years would he have guessed that he would have been finding comfort in Neville Longbottom's words, over Seamus' death.

Of course, he had never expected his best mate to be murdered by one of his best friends before either were of age.

He swallowed hard, fighting back the lump in his throat. He needed to focus on something. He couldn't focus on what had happened. He

had to keep moving forward. And right now there was nothing that could help Seamus, and Kally was far out of his reach. But Ginny?

He could actually be there for her, and he'd be damned if he let her go through this alone.

"You wouldn't know whose owl that happens to be would you?" Neville asked, cutting into his thoughts.

Dean's eyes darted over, following Neville's upturned gaze to where a barn owl sat in the rafters, staring moodily down at them.

His brow immediately wrinkled at the sight of it. To the best of his recollection, he had never seen any sort of owl perched within the common room rafters, let alone that particular owl.

"Maybe we could coax her down, and have her take a note to Ginny for us," Neville mused aloud. "The owl could at least fly up."

Dean's eyes suddenly lit up, the inkling of an idea forming in his mind. Without a word he turned, bolting up the boys' staircase, practically bowling into their room.

Sliding to a spot besides his bed, he dropped to his knees, ducking down in search of his broom.

If he couldn't walk past the wards on the girls' staircase, then maybe he could fly over them.

Rummaging beneath his bed, he shoved aside a stack of sketchbooks, sending one sliding off the top and onto the floor, its pages fluttering open.

Absentmindedly he reached out to close it, only to see that it was what it had landed on.

His throat tightened, as if being strangled by an invisible foe.

Lying there, in heavy pencil, was an image he had drawn barely a week ago.

The shades of gray bent and twisted with a life of their own, enchanted into life by a spell that had taken him the better part of a year to master.

Swallowing heavily, he clambered to his knees, reclaiming the sketch from its unsuitable position amongst the dust particles littering the floor.

Placing the book carefully on his lap, he observed Kally's likeness with a bittersweet taste.

Like most nights, she was stretched out on the floor in front of the common room hearth. Her reading glasses were perched atop her nose, her legs stretching languidly out like a cat. And every so often he would watch one of her wispy strands fall in front of her face, her mouth pouting in irritation as she blew it away, wrinkling her nose.

And now she was gone. Missing. And he had no way of reaching her.

A guilty feeling swept over him. One of shame and the utmost loathing, for there was one route he could explore.

He was simply too cowardly to take it.

Unable to look at her any longer, his gaze swept to the side of the image, where Kally's satchel lay resting against the base of the couch, partially obscured by one of Seamus' legs.

Dean remembered that day. Seamus had sat there, leafing through an Astronomy book, batting Ginny away half-heartedly as she vied for his attention.

To Kally's credit, she had ignored the display admirably, only flinging ink in their general direction twice.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately considering her feelings for Ginny's brother, she had managed to nail Ron as he had been walking by on both occasions.

He vividly remembered having to actually drop his drawing pad to play mediator between the two, as a rather heated shouting match had begun between them.

Swallowing hard, he flipped the book closed. It would not do to dwell on people he could no longer reach.

Seamus was dead. And there was nothing that would change that.

Once again Dean began his methodical search for his broom, finally finding it amongst his haphazard possessions. He stood abruptly, drawing in a deep breath as he took a final glance at Seamus' empty bed.

His hands curled tightly around the unpolished, splintery wood of his broom.

"I'll take care of her," He whispered fiercely, eyes never leaving a spot where his best friend's ghost would, at least for him, always remain.

Drawing up his willpower he turned to the dormitory door, walking back out into the hall.

It was only then that he heard Neville's shouts, and his confused gaze once again followed his roommates, only this time the path led not to the rafter's, but to the girl's stairs.

And it was right then, at the exact same time that Hermione Granger made her decision hundreds of miles away, that he heard Ginny Weasley let out a soul-shattering scream.

Dean was over the wards, hexing the charms away from her locked door, and kicking it open within thirty seconds.

He was just in time to see her fiery, red-headed form collapse, her deep brown eyes rolling into the back of her skull.

Far off, at the same time, in Number 8 Grimmauld, a first year Slytherin was having dinner with her family, her tight blonde curls

pulled up into a ponytail. She had no knowledge of Dean or the red-headed girl, and she was oblivious to the foreign memories flitting through her elder, golden-haired acquaintance's head. She was even oblivious to the powerful magic pulsating through a young, black-haired man's veins only two doors down.

Despite this, Tiffany was still afraid.

But not nearly afraid enough.

"The worst parts of tragedy, are the marks left on the survivors, however well hidden they may be."

A. K. Lovell

Chapter 32 Marked

No respite was ever to be found in the realm of dreams.

For her, only nightmares.

And even in Kally's mind of swirling thoughts, both her own and not her own, the dream was still the same.

Sadly it was not a dream.

Cold rain droplets pelted against her, penetrating the torn clothing flanking her flesh with the startling ferocity of a thousand icy knives. Her mouth opened and closed, the downpour splattering against her cyanotic lips, blue from the strangling and the rain's bitter chill. Weakly her fingers clawed at the iron grip encircling her neck, to no avail. Her oxygen sapped muscles simply lacked the strength.

She hung suspended, toes barely scraping the ground as she summoned her last reserves to kick out with long, aching legs. Once. Twice. Nothing happened. She may have missed. She may have lacked the strength to even get close. She simply did not know. The world was fading.

An asphyxiated gargle bubbled in her throat, her trachea slowly crushing beneath her assailant's palms. Dimly she was aware of the way her mud-laden sock stuck to her foot, as her leg seized spasmodically, her toes kicking up the top layers of puddling water.

Once pink lips were numb. Golden eyes rolled back, her blurred gaze taking in the black thunderclouds dominating the night sky, just before disappearing behind twitching eyelids.

Her head had been tilted at an unnatural angle, back so far that her vertebrae were near snapping. It had hurt, for awhile. But now? She could barely feel it.

Somewhere, faintly, she heard a disgusted feminine snarl, followed by a huff of exertion and the splash of a discarded body.

The fingers around her throat slackened in intensity, long enough for the bile choking her throat to register, along with the coppery bite of the mingled blood and sweat dripping into her mouth.

"Get rid of that Muggle," The name was spat with vicious repulsion. "If either were a Reach they'd have done something by now."

The pressure around her carotid arteries suddenly increased as she was raised and chucked to the side, discarded like the inedible entrails of a recent kill. Her ribcage took the impact, her legs smacking against the wet ground just after. Slowly, unable to stop it, she felt herself sinking into the rapidly growing mud puddle, the water lapping at her lips.

She couldn't move. She couldn't even roll over. Not even if she wanted to.

Panting unsteadily, spluttering mouthfuls of muddy water, a numbing overtook her. Unable to do more to escape her slowly approaching death, she pulled her lips closed, drawing in breath through her nose, feeling the splattered mud from her initial impact sliding down her face in thick, wet chunks.

It was unsettling, the lack of pain. She was hurt. Bleeding from more places than she was aware. Though something sent her wrenching, her form trembling from more than physical shock alone.

Sean.

Through half-lidded eyes and the strobing lightning of the storm, she sought him out. Peering across the horizontal line of the ground for her brother.

As if the pitiless woman sensed her query, a black, leather boot reared back and kicked, sending a pale something flopping into her line of vision.

A limp hand, its fingers curled over the palm fell to rest in front of her. A choking sound would have ripped from her throat had she the breath to form it. Instead an icy grip tightened around her heart, and she tilted her head, her wavering vision following the arm to the person it was attached to.

She saw him. His hazy, clouded-over eyes were doing their best to look at her, though their golden hue was the only recognizable thing about them. Sean's gaze simply no longer held the unflappable solidity that she had come to associate with him.

Now, only a resigned anger filled her brother's gaze. He was furious, but no longer with the monsters who had killed them. There was no denying it. They were dying. Not dead yet, but they would be shortly. And Sean was no longer angry with the monstrous people who had done this to them.

No. He was angry with himself, and it made her want to scream at his stubbornness. He always had taken the older brother role a bit too seriously. And the fact that he had done a bang-up job of protecting his little sister seemed to be the worst part about death to him.

She could tell all of this just from looking at him, even in her oxygen deprived state. She had always been able to read him, just as he had always been able to read her.

"Kismet," he mouthed feebly, rain splattering from his bluing lips. She tried to smile at his nickname for her, but could not. She tried to swallow, but could not. And trying to reach her hand out, she found she could not reach.

Sean, however, did.

His cold fingers twitched, his arm undulating across the ground like a snake.

And then his slick, slimy fingers curled around hers.

And it was then that the tingling began...

"It happened again, didn't it?"

Dean had been seated on the edge of a bed, elbows on his knees, face resting in his hands. He had all but fallen asleep sitting that way, but at the sound of Ginny's voice his psyche came rocketing out of dreamland into the very present here and now.

And what a damnable hell and now it was.

Seeing her awake, slouching upwards in the bed he had placed her in, he offered her expectant look a strained smile. "That's one way of putting it," he stated hollowly.

The sleepiness in her freckled expression immediately vanished, her brow crinkling with apprehension as she wrung the bed sheets between her hands. But to him, the emotions caressing her face meant the world, for at least she was no longer catatonic. She had been right up until she collapsed the night before.

Not to mention that she had just spoken on her own. It was something he knew for a fact she hadn't done since awakening in the hospital wing. And it was a shame it had taken what had happened the previous night to snap her out of it.

Unaware of his thoughts, Ginny sighed resignedly. "Worse than normal?" she questioned.

Chin still resting in his hands, he nodded. "That's also a way of putting it." He was in no hurry to tell her, to explain. He wasn't about to be the one responsible for her withdrawing back into her previous state.

Despite the potential seriousness of the situation, he watched her small face contort into a scowl meant for him. "You're incensing me,

Thomas. I'm recovering from the Imperious curse and a concussion, and thanks to you-know-what I have one hell of a headache. So I'll ask again." Ginny sat up in bed, allowing the sheets to slide down to her waist. "Do you really want to keep dodging my question?"

Dean felt warmed as he watched her red-headed temper rear its head, for a tiny spark could be seen flickering within her narrowed brown eyes. While it was a far cry from the burning fire he was used to seeing there, it was something at least.

"Well Gin," he said, forcing as much lightness into his words as he could manage, "it's hard to dodge a question you haven't been asked."

"Don't make me summon one of those nude drawings you've done, Thomas. I'll do it."

His jaw slipped right off his palm, the heel of his hand striking his nose painfully. He ignored this, staring at her in unabashed disbelief. Forget a slow recovery from her previous shock. She had just rocketed right past psych ward graduation and back to her normal temperament.

"What makes you think I have something like that?" he asked, with what he hoped was a casual air.

Ginny inclined a red eyebrow. "You're an artist," she answered, as if explaining something to a small child. "And all good artists have at least one sketch of the human body, au naturel, stashed away somewhere."

Dean found himself eyeing her with a profound amount of distrust, not to mention apprehension. "You honestly think I would have convinced someone to pose for me?"

Now she rolled her brown eyes. "Since when have you needed a willing model? I've seen the kinds of magazines you and my brother have stashed in your dorm. That's perfect sketching material if I've even seen any."

Dean didn't know what to be more disturbed by. That Ginny had obviously stumbled upon their stash of Wizard's Mating Weekly, the fact that she knew far too much about his sketching abilities, or about what had transpired only hours earlier, knocking the fiery pixie flat on her ass.

He decided to go with the former option. That was safer. For her peace of mind at least.

"Gin, what exactly would drive an even half-sane female to go digging through a male dormitory's dirty laundry hamper, to the point where such literary revelries would be unearthed?"

A sly smile tweaked her lips. "Nothing. But thanks for confirming their location for me. I'll file that fun fact away until I need to blackmail something from one of you."

His eyes formed into tiny slits. "Why you tricky, little..."

But before he could finish the strew of names for the auburn haired minx, she cut him off.

"Can we stop dodging my question now?"

The light-hearted feeling that had been growing within him vanished. He knew he couldn't avoid the topic forever. But his clumsy lips were determined to try, seeing as how they were already forming a rather weak response.

"Again, I didn't hear any question, Gin-gin."

And then it happened. Her return to normality vanished in a heartbeat, a strange look overtaking her features. Her next words emerged so soft that they seemed foreign coming from her normally boisterous lungs.

"Dean," she whispered, something missing from her voice, "I shouldn't have to ask. Not from you."

He didn't break his gaze away from hers. Hell, even had he wanted to he wouldn't have had it in him. Instead he watched her carefully schooled expression carefully, searching for the real emotion hidden behind her taunt mask.

"This one doesn't bear repeating. Ever."

He had said it firmly and decisively, leaving no room for argument.

She argued anyway.

"I deserve to know, Dean," she clipped petulantly.

Damn. She had him there. But he'd be damned if he let her know it.

"Think of it," He suggested carefully, "as a surefire way of protecting your own ass. If you don't know what it was, then those Ministry officials can't force it out of you again."

"What if the information could help someone?" she countered, her legs curling up beneath the bed sheets, like a cat preparing to spring.

He eyed her warily. "Trust me little Red. No one is going to get helped by your newest little tidbit." Quite the opposite, in fact. But he wasn't about to tell her that.

"Maybe if you just told me we could discuss this like rational adults, rather than bickering children," she mock lectured, sounding uncannily similar to the impersonation she often did of her mother.

He smiled weakly at her attempted humor. "Gin, you're better off not knowing this one."

She snorted derisively. "If that were true, you could have just fabricated some false one to ease my 'naive little mind'."

"You're a seer, Ginny. Color me dumb, but I'm guessing you'd see right through that."

They both lapsed into a frustrated silence, and his eyes turned to the window.

It was just after dawn now, and the rising light of sunrise could be seen streaming in through the dormitory windows, the sun finally peaking out from over the Forbidden Forest's tree line. Since she had passed out last evening, time had dragged uneventfully, and he'd kept watch over her the entire time.

She had slept all night, in a prophecy induced coma, but now Ginny Weasley turned her gaze back to him, staring with unparalleled fire, her tousled red hair shining like a blazing halo around her head in the rising sun's reflected light.

Faced with the vision before him, he was again reminded of what a rare glory she was. It was no wonder she was a seer. What was crazy was that she had not started 'seeing' things sooner.

Of course, it wasn't a natural talent, as she had told them multiple times. No...it was something she had acquired that night when she had lain half dead on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets. Apparently sometimes those who have been near death, those who have touched the other side, bring something back with them.

And Ginny had. She had brought back the ability to see farther than she ought.

And it had been hell for her ever since.

"Dean," She implored determinedly. "Tell me. Please."

Her eyes held his, glinting defiantly. Still he hesitated. It was true, she may find out for herself. Eventually. And the key word there was may.

But did he really want her to find out from one of her dreams? In her sleep and alone?

"Dean?"

His head jolted up, finding her nose inches from his. She smirked at his startled stare. Hell, he hadn't even seen her get up, but now she was taking a seat beside him, placing a gentle hand on his shaking forearm.

He frowned at the sight. When had his arms begun shaking?

An audible swallow resounded besides him. "It couldn't have been as bad as you're making it out to be," Ginny persisted firmly. "Besides," She continued, trying to sound impish despite the waver of her voice, "Now I really do know where your magazine stash is, which leads me to the list of things I could extort from you for keeping that information quiet."

He grunted in her direction.

"One," She counted. "I've always wanted a puppy. A Beagle would do nicely, but I'm not too particular. So long as it's from a pound or a stray. They need homes more than ones in a pet shop."

He ignored her, making a mental note to find a stray Beagle for her graduation present in three years.

Three years...they could be dead by then.

"Two," She continued, either unaware of or choosing to ignore his bleak thoughts. "I've really always loathed History of Magic. Seeing as how you are free of the subject this year, and must woefully miss it..."

"Won't work," He interjected. "Hogwarts is all but closed. You can't have classes when the school's not functioning."

"It's not closed," She muttered, coiling her nails into his arm in an obvious attempt to cause him pain.

It worked. Shaking her off, he countered, "There are only eight Gryffindor's left here. I can't imagine how many students the other houses have. Do you really think the teachers will stick around to teach so few?"

"They will," She said doggedly, "and they'll insist we continue our coursework. Now three. You know how fond I am of that pair of shorts of yours..."

He couldn't help it. He snorted. "First of all, Gin, those are boxers, not shorts. Boxers as in undergarments. Your brothers would skin me alive if they ever saw you walking around in my equivalent of knickers. Secondly, you shouldn't have stolen them in the first place."

She blinked innocently at him. "The house elves stole all my exercise clothing. I needed something to practice Quidditch in."

"Entertaining half the male population hardly qualifies as practicing Quidditch."

She grunted. "Alright. So I thought it would be funny to see my brother's reaction. The dolt's so thick he didn't even notice."

Her brother... Dean swallowed hard. "Shouldn't you still be trying to extort things from me?" He asked quickly, desperate for a distraction. Any distraction before she read him like a book. Seers did have an abhorrent tendency of interpreting people's thoughts.

And Ginny could only get better at it.

Carefully averting his eyes to the floor, he listened as she carried on.

"I've also been meaning to write a letter to your sister," She resumed. "I did promise to introduce myself after all, and I'm sure she'd find quite a few ways to put this information to use."

"That's not extortion. That's just cruel," he informed with the air of the condemned.

"All the more reason to arm the poor girl with ammunition."

He huffed in appreciation at her tactics. "Blackmail at its finest," he muttered, swiveling his head to the side. Looking her in the eyes, his expression grew far more grave.

"Does everything predicted happen?" He asked abruptly. Earnestly.
"No matter what?"

His sudden change didn't appear to phase her. She had been expecting it.

In response, Ginny shrugged her delicate shoulders. "Dumbledore said nothing is written in stone, but prophecies are the most likely outcome. It's why..."

"It's why they are so carefully guarded by the Department of Mysteries. So no one can mess with the future timeline," Dean finished for her. He had heard the spiel that first night. So had Seamus. While her brother had been off gallivanting with his friends, ignoring his own sister when she had actually tried to get his attention for a change, he and Seamus had stayed with her.

Not that they'd had much choice in the matter. They had been with her when she made it. The experience was what had drawn the three of them so close together.

Oddly enough, it was the beginning of the end for Seamus. Considering it was Ginny's hand that had killed him. Unwillingly yes, but indeed she had. The Imperious Curse had a way of forcing someone into things like that.

It was funny how life worked out.

Besides him she sighed heavily. "Are you planning on telling me sometime today? If not, I suggest you get to work on that Beagle."

He grimaced at her annoyed tone. "Ginny..."

"Dean!" she mocked, finally losing her patience. "I already know it can't be anything good. But sometimes not knowing is worse. Especially when you're the one who predicted it."

"You only say that because you don't know..."

"I would if you would just tell me you stubborn arse of a..." She abruptly trailed off, panting as she regained control of herself.

At some point his hands had balled into tight, strained fists. He stared in fascination as his knuckles turned white.

"Dean," She said quietly, voice shaking, "Despite what my brothers seem to think, I'm not some child to protect. And it would mean the world to me if you didn't start treating me like they do."

His throat tightened uncomfortably at her words. Her brothers...

Turning to her, he ground out grimly, "You predicted a death. A few deaths. Actually."

Her expression remained neutral, and he hoped to God that he was doing the right thing.

"Be honest with me, Ginny," he plead softly. "Are you really sure you can deal with knowing whose? You weren't speaking yesterday and I..." Turning his gaze from her startled eyes to look at anything but her, he continued, "I don't think I can deal with losing three of my friends in one weekend."

And he couldn't. Seamus was dead and Kally was missing. Harry and Hermione were gone as well, and while their absence cut him deeply, they had never been close. Not in the way he was with Seamus or Gin, and growing to Kal...

He simply couldn't lose Ginny to grief. He wouldn't. And despite her present demeanor, how she had been forcing a lightness to her voice only moments ago, he was terrified that if he told her the knowledge would send her spiraling right back down into a spiral of grief.

And the memory of her lying stark white in the hospital wing, eyes wide and staring in shock, was still all too fresh.

And it should be. It had only been yesterday morning. November 1st, the dawn after the wizarding world went to hell.

The day after Seamus died.

Slowly, with careful precision, the back of Ginny's freckled hand appeared on his knee, her steady words filling the air.

"I don't think anyone can be ready to know that," she intoned shakily. "But you're not going to lose me. I..."

Her voice wavered, but for the life of him he could do nothing but stare at the back of her little hand.

"If people are going to die," She said softly, straying purposely from the gaping wound that was Seamus and his effect upon her. "Then we should try to help. Maybe we can change it. Or at the very least, cut the death toll down. But we'll have to strategize if we're going to do that, and I can't help you if I'm unaware of what to expect."

His voice came out in a dry croak. "It won't be pleasant."

"Death never is," she whispered sadly.

Making his decision, he spoke. "It's worse when it hits close to home."

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her small form go rigid. "How close?"

Her tone had been calm, carefully controlled, and faker than hell. Dean was not fooled, and neither was she.

But because he respected her, he told her the truth.

"Your brothers, Ginny," he spoke roughly. "Half of them."

His rough words fell into the empty space of the quiet room, as the prophetic words she had spoken rang through his head.

"Much blood will descend on the sons of the red headed purebloods. Half will fall beneath death's unswift sword..."

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he felt his chest rise and fall with tension. Then, casting a concerned glance at Ginny, he watched a transformation slowly occurring.

Within her normally warm brown orbs, the depression of Seamus' death was stirring, becoming overwrought with the uncounterable pain of the truth he had just spoken. Though it was not just pain that shown within her flickering gaze.

Determination shown there as well.

Ginerva Weasley loved her brothers, and she would not give them up without a fight, even if it meant changing fate itself.

Dean had known she would not accept this quietly, so there was no surprise as he watched her clamber shakily to her socked feet. And then, with the dogged resolve of one far surer of themselves than she could possibly be, he watched her make her way towards the dormitory door, not even bothering to dress herself in anything other than her ill-fitting night clothes.

She paused, hovering beneath the doorframe, one short-finger-nailed hand holding onto the door itself. "We should talk to Trelawney," she whispered, voice barely audible. "She may be a right old fraud, but maybe she can help me figure out when and how it'll happen."

Dean knew better to argue, and an absurd part of him actually understood her logic. Trelawney might not be able to make accurate predictions herself, but she did know a thing or two about interpreting the things true seers could see in crystal balls.

And lucky for them, Ginny happened to be a true seer, still coming into her own.

Rising from the bed to follow Ginny down the slide-of-a-staircase, Dean only hoped Ginny would come into her own fast enough to save her family.

She awoke shaking, her fingers curling around the sweat drenched sheets as a scream lodged in her throat, unable to break free. Her skin was tingling, as if the most intense static electricity imaginable were crawling, reverberating across her outer tissues, and by the gods it hurt.

She could feel everything. Every living thing within the house. Every heartbeat pumping rhythmically within the animate, living breathing beings nearby. And within some deep, primal part of her, the terror resurrected by her nightmare was causing her to lash out instinctively, her strange magic reaching out like an extension of her very self to smother those life forces, and the electrical currents that drove their thumping cardiac muscles to the limits.

Just as she had once done to her very own brother, stealing his energy in an animalistic attempt to keep her own heart beating just long enough to survive.

A chill, colder than the solidest of ices, rocketed through her. Her desperate breaths became hotter, her body hyperventilating in sudden panic as the realization of what she was doing took her. For like any cornered animal, a creature would use whatever means that it had at its disposal to defend itself when threatened.

Her dream had been vivid, ghastly, and true. A memory of the night that the last remnants of her family were taken from her. The fear it inspired within her was all too real, and nature had run its course, for she had begun to use her ability to draw on the electricity within the living things around her without even thinking about it as she had slept.

And she was hurting someone. She could feel their presence very near. She could feel the way energy moved through them as her magic attempted to suck it away.

And she knew whose it was.

Potter was kneeling on the floor, next to where she lay at the base of the bed, his large hand having wrapped around her upper arm, and she suddenly understood that it was him who had awoken her.

The King of Idiocy had apparently launched himself across the room at the first sign of her distress, and had somehow wound up with her near the foot of the bed, where one's feet would normally rest as they slumbered. Only her entire body was there, her body's nightmarish thrashing having deposited her there.

But what her fiery eyes saw were how his stone-like features were contorted in pain.

Raw, unadulterated, physical pain.

And she was the one doing that to him.

She let out a strange, choking sound unrecognizable to her own ears. A foreign clicking resonating in her voice, something familiar to a different species, perhaps, but not to her.

A horrible grimace distorted Potter's features as he clambered to his feet, dropping onto the bed next to where she lay tangled beneath the sheets. The thick air filling the room was vibrating, crackling with static electricity, and for a brief, paralyzing second all she could do was watch with horrified eyes as Potter reached out through it, reaching out a rough, calloused hand to again lay upon her shoulder even as she felt herself unable to stop the electrical currents quickly enough.

The second his hand fell upon her bare skin an electrical shock rocked her, forming an instantaneous circuit as her magic shout out to wrap upon his life force with an unyielding vice grip.

She screamed this time, her body flying out from beneath the covers in an instant as she sought to put as much distance between them as she could. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that if he continued to touch her that she'd hurt him.

Mortally, hurt him.

She was scuttling backwards across the small bed, her back connecting solidly against a wall that the bed apparently rested

against, and the collision sent the air in her lungs huffing out in one pained, coughing breath.

Potter's face remained twisted, as the sheets she had kicked away slowly fell, fluttering to the floor as if in slow motion.

Throwing her hand out to touch something, anything into which she could release the electrical buildup within her, she felt the wooden post of the bunk she slept beneath.

Crushing her eyes shut she released it in one fast burst, breaking the circuitry she had felt forming with the rest of the living, letting the energy flow out of her into the aged oak.

It wasn't until water doused her arm that the smell of smoke registered with her sensory organs. And then, looking at where her white knuckled grip had curled around the post, she slowly pried her overheated fingers away one by one.

Even in the unlit, windowless room, she could see the blisters already forming upon her scorched hand, whilst the scent of charred wood filled her nostrils.

Biting back the excruciating, throbbing of her fingers, she lifted shame filled eyes, meeting jade colored ones.

Potter simply stared back, his dripping wand outstretched, chest rising and falling heavily.

She didn't have to ask him to know that he understood exactly what had just happened.

Somehow the thought that he did not mind frightened her more than the knowledge that she could have killed him without ever having meant to.

Slowly her lips formed the words.

"Stay away from me."

The methodical, steady drip of intravenous delivery as Gentamicin, 2.5 milligrams per kilogram, flowed into his father's septicemic bloodstream.

Blood poisoning. It was the only knowledge he held of the word septicemic, but according to the physicians that had been in and out of the room like wild-fire, all entering through the sliding, air-tight door and all donning the same white face masks, surgical gloves and caps, something much worse than that was plaguing his father.

Something they couldn't identify. Something with rapid progression, multiple symptoms indicative of a great many things, with a few blatant ones indicative of a pneumonic manifestation.

Only pneumonia could not explain the freckle-like rashes forming on his father's skin, bespeckling his flesh as if a child artist, armed with nothing but a reddish tipped paintbrush, were dotting circular marks across his father at random.

And then there were the harder areas, rising within and near the rashes. The bulbous spots that were just beginning to crack open, oozing puss and blood when prodded with stainless steel tools.

Needles had been injected, samples drawn, lab work rushed.

Still, the doctors hadn't been able to provide him with any answers. Not even as his father had slipped into a morphine induced slumber, a breathing tube inserted down his throat.

The tube. It had been inserted the last time his father had doubled over coughing, choking on what he was coughing up: Free-flowing, liquid, bloody sputum.

Red water. His father had coughed up red water. It was what his little brother had called it. By the gods, his little brother had come in, accompanied by their sister and mother just in time to see that.

His mother had been sedated, his younger siblings taken elsewhere. They weren't handling this well.

Now all Edward could do was sit and watch through blue-green eyes, staring through the thick plastic glasses that the infectious disease ward had forced him to don, watching as the pallor of his father's skin grew increasingly dark, the blotchy purple areas growing beneath them as his dad's underlying tissues deteriorated, becoming increasingly more damaged.

Acral necrosis. That was what the doctor's had called it. But Edward didn't care what it was called. He didn't give a damn. All he cared about was getting his good-humored father well.

The doctor's claimed they needed more time. Time for the tests to be run. Time for the proper course of treatments to be determined.

Only thing was, they didn't have more time.

Whatever it was unleashing hell upon his father's middle-aged body, it had accelerated during the course of the night.

The pulse line of his father grew erratic again, sending his beats per minute well above 90, the cut off for tachycardia. His father's pulse had been oscillating for hours, just as his temperature had, reaching 101.8 and still climbing. He wanted to wipe his father's forehead clean of the sweat congealing upon it, but he couldn't. There was a loose, clear plastic barrier encircling his father, flapping with each stale gust of the air tight door opening.

Feeling the sweat trickling down his own brow, Edward reached a shaky hand up, wiping it away with the back of his wrist. His head hurt, his body ached, his muscles throbbed. His throat even itched.

A shiver crept up his spine, for somehow Edward knew that his own discomfort had little to do with his lack of sleep and overnight vigil.

No.

It had more to do with the disease killing his dad.

The pale man, who had loved and raised him, let out a strange hiss from behind his oxygen draped barrier, his breathing becoming suddenly erratic.

Reaching out his arm he hit the call button, his father's new pattern of breathing sending shockwaves of fear through him.

And as the door slid open with an uncaring hiss, two physicians rushing forth in time for the flat-lining, Edward dropped his head into his hands and cried.

She watched him over her knees, having drawn her legs to her chest involuntarily, like a small and frightened child. She remained huddled in the corner, her naked toes curled around the bottom sheet still clinging to the mattress, as she repeated her tremulous words.

"Please, Potter. Stay away."

She didn't want to hurt him. God she didn't want to. But the aftermath of her energy was still rippling within her, even as she cradled her burnt and blistering hand within the crease of her other.

Potter, lowering his wand, still heaving in exertion, blinked at her as if very, very startled.

Water dripped from her smiting fingers, a fresh, woodsy scent emitting from the recently burnt supporting pole of the upper bunk bed. The room did not appear to be visibly lit, yet everything appeared around her in stark clarity, in muted colors, but her gaze oddly cut through the gloom to where Potter sat at the opposite end of the bed, not six feet away from where she resided near where the pillows normally belonged.

Six feet away...

It was not far enough. Not nearly.

His fingers suddenly uncurled, releasing his wand to fall upon his drier side of the mattress, where it landed with a slight bounce.

Then she felt the mattress move as he began to slide up along it, clearly intent on getting closer to her.

"Don't!" The word was out of her mouth before she could even process it. Her golden eyes had slammed shut on their own accord, as if not being able to see him would make him go away. Still she felt the damp divan beneath her, its wetness uncomfortable.

And her head hurt. God it hurt. Almost as much as her hand.

"Kaylens..."

His rough voice trailed off, enveloping them both in silence. Slowly, steadily, the sharp pain within her hand settled down into a dull throbbing, affording her frayed nerves some small measure of respite.

"I'm not leaving," he finally said intractably.

Drawing in a shuttering breath, she let out a whispered plea.

"I wish you would."

Again opening her eyes, taking in the way his normally tall sitting torso hunkered beneath the upper bunk, head held low to avoid hitting the wood, she watched as a smile quirked his lips.

"Don't worry, Kaylens," he said, light amusement and concern touching his tone. "I know you weren't trying to off me intentionally."

Her lips parted, a protesting sound croaking from her throat, which felt dry from disuse.

Potter responded to this by letting out a short chortle.

"It's not funny," she retorted in a whisper.

The slant of his mouth only grew. "Sure it's not."

She gaped at him, a shameful feeling swelling within her. "You could have been killed," she said shakily. "What could possibly be funny about that?"

Potter's smirk faded, significance overtaking his features. "So could have you," he stated without apology. "Releasing uncontrolled magic in your sleep isn't exactly a recipe for longevity."

"It's happened before," she whispered truthfully. "I would have been fine."

Something dark flickered behind his eyes. "I couldn't take that chance."

"You should have."

Her grating words hung on the air as his features tensed. And unable to consider why, she averted her eyes. The feeling of the wall behind her was claustrophobic, the expanse of bed separating them having shrunk measurably. Not to mention the upper bunk. She had apparently been resting on the lower, and the upper now seemed to descend slightly, as if intent on trapping her there.

Potter's mouth opened and closed several times, wordlessly, before words finally fell forth.

"Is that what you really want?" he finally asked, stony solemnity having drained the remaining smile from his tone. "Me to leave you alone?"

She stared at the damp sheets, saturated with wand water, something twisting inside her. "No," she finally murmured. "That's not what I..."

"Then what did you mean?" he questioned edgily. "Because I'm not leaving. Get that through your head right now."

Her eyes flickered up, meeting his steely gaze.

"Why?" She whispered, confusion lacing her breath.

"Because," he replied, eyes spinning with an emotion she ill-recognized, "you didn't leave when I needed your help. You could have left me to get devoured by those damn wolves in that clearing, but you didn't. And somehow," he continued, voice lowering, "I think you knew just what danger you were putting yourself in by doing that."

Fervor reverberated from him, conviction and passion she had seen hints of, finally unmasked.

"But," he orated, eyes boring into hers, "you did it anyway."

Her limbs felt oddly shaky. "Potter," she protested, "anyone would have..."

"No," he interjected fiercely. "Not anyone would have. And I'm not about to let you hurt yourself because some cowardly girl injected you with something she never should have, forcing you to relive your whole damn life just to remember who you are. And considering all the unhappy memories you must have..."

Kally felt her golden eyes widen. "You knew," she declared. "You knew I'd dream like that. How?"

"Dumbledore," he disclosed, not missing a beat. "He said it used to happen, but you'd gotten over it. But with your mind fighting to sort your memories from the unicorn's, he said you'd be reliving some pretty bad moments from your past, and that it might cause you to draw again. He said it could hurt you."

She watched in muted fascination as that dark look overtook his features once again.

"And there was no way in hell," he hissed with conviction, "that I was about to let that happen because of a freaking nightmare."

Astonishment swirled within her. "Potter," she whispered, breathing just his name. Nothing more. What was there to say to that?

A wry smile touched his mouth as he watched her clear confusion. "Besides," he added, much more softly. "I've been waiting all night for you to wake up. I'm not about to leave now that you have. I haven't had anyone to fight with in nearly twenty four hours, and I'm itching for a good one."

Her lips parted in a disbelieving gap. "Somehow," she heard herself saying, "I doubt that. I have these hazy recollections of screaming matches with your voice as a prominent participant."

He let out a laugh, thought it sounded forced. "I wondered if you'd remember that. Snape and I were really that loud, huh?"

Dropping her face, allowing her hair to hang in her eyes, she hid a cheerless smile. "You know," she disclosed, wondering at how clear everything from the night before was, "listening to that made me almost like Snape. Apparently we have something in common."

Through the angular strands framing her face, she observed him cocking his head to the side, amused sarcasm tingeing his tone. "Oh? And what's that?"

"Our mutual dislike of you."

"Why is it that we always come back to that?" he bated, sounding only slightly aggravated.

Teeth gnawing on her lower lip, she asked curiously, "Would you have it any other way?"

"Merlin, no," he laughed. It was a peculiar sound.

And then a strange, slithering, warm sensation moved through her mind, like a floodgate suddenly cracking open to allow a tepid trickle to filter through. And as it did, awareness of the alien other flooded her mind. Her conversation with Potter faded into background noise, evaporating into nothingness as her eyes unfocused.

And then she was there, with them. She could hear Lightning's hooves beating against the balmy summer night, during a time when he still bore the colt-like gangliness of his kind. The heavy, moist scent of ferns filtered through his nostrils, her nostrils, inundating their senses. The distinction between them no longer mattered. They were one, if only in memory. She thought as him. Saw as him. Felt as him.

The running herd pressed in around him, comforting him, protecting him from the darker creatures lurking within the forest that night. And he did not mind, for he was afraid.

Even unicorns felt fear when gleaming moonlight refracted from the arachnid lenses that peered at them from the shadowed recesses of the forest, just over the unmarked yet uncrossable territorial boundaries of the wood.

"Kaylens."

She heard her name through the fog-like mist swirling up from the grass-covered ground. It came again, only this time more insistent. Yet the herd ran onwards, faster and faster as if the hounds of hell were at their heels.

"KAYLENS!"

A static-like jolt rocketed through her arm, and she found herself blinking her eyes rapidly, clearing the hazy confusion left in the wake of the new memory that had been revealed to her.

Potter's stormy eyes were inches from hers, green clouds swirling with alarm.

Both of his hands pressed firmly down upon her shoulders, and she was startled to feel the violent heaving of her chest, the quickening of her breath, as if she had ran a considerable distance in too short a time.

"Are you..." he began, only to be cut off as she hastily nodded in response to his unfinished question. She felt the tension in Potter's grip drain until his fingers lay slack and loosened against her skin, as

she forced her breath steady, evening it out.

He relaxed backwards onto his legs, holding her at arms length as he studied her with eyes that betrayed considerable relief. Somehow he had made it across the bed to her. How long had she been...gone?

Not wanting to think on it she flexed her fingers, finding the burnt tips of her right hand lacking in the pain that her nerves had been sadistically notifying her of only minutes before. Puzzlement crossed her features as she glanced down at her hands, finding the blistering of before still present, but the reddened coloration dulled in intensity.

"Neat, isn't it?"

Her head rocketed up, and she gaped at him with exposed bewilderment. "What?" she questioned stupidly.

"Unicorn blood," he offered by way of explanation. "It's magical. Dumbledore said that once magical blood is in you, it never dies. The cells will just keep regenerating. Over time, it'll change you, but for now..."

He shrugged. "For now it'll dull any pain you feel. And over time it'll help you heal faster."

Glossy, hazel eyes blinked beneath long lashes. "Oh," she whispered. Heat was radiating off of him, and even with an arms length separating them, it was the only response she could muster with him still touching her like that.

His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed, jade eyes the exact shade of newly matured leaves staring at her with a burning intensity. "I'm glad you're okay," he confessed, pausing, hesitating uncertainly. "I was worried."

"So was I," she murmured lowly, lowering her eyes. The pain of her nightmares was still there, simmering beneath the surface, a fresh wound concealed beneath thin bandages. As was the remorse she

felt, for her magic had physically hurt him, he who had risked so much for her, even though he would never admit it.

She had hurt him, and the thought pained her immeasurably, for reasons she did not want to think on just yet.

Biting her lip, she apologetically continued, her voice soft. "It had to hurt. What I did to you," she whispered, "I..."

His hands suddenly slid, stilling her words as his palms moved down along her shoulders, until his hands protectively gripped her upper arms. Her eyes watched him, and how his own eyes suddenly refused to meet her own. Instead his green irises were following the path his hands were taking, tilting down and lingering where his hands now rested upon her skin.

"No offense," he informed, a hint of dark irony in his words, "But your drawing has nothing on the Cruciatus. I've had much worse."

"You shouldn't have."

He smiled grimly. "Doesn't matter. It happened," he restated, pensive lines of resignation creasing his face. "And I'm sure it'll happen again."

She shook her head, sending her thick hair askew. "It shouldn't have to happen again," she insisted adamantly. "It's not..."

"Fair," he finished bitterly. "Since when has life ever been fair?"

Slowly, carefully, the sensation of his fingers rhythmic dance upon her skin registered. He was unconsciously massaging her arms as he spoke.

"It isn't fair," Potter continued, turning his head to talk to the wall. "Not everyone can really understand that, but you..." he trailed off, sounding wistful. "I thought, of all the people, because of what you've seen, that you could."

What she had seen...

Suddenly she felt naked before him. Her mind, stripped bare, for him to see. He had been inside her. Seen what she had seen. Felt what she had felt.

Goosebumps prickled along her flesh, a disquieting wave of anguish brought about by the knowledge that her history had been laid exposed before him.

She had never told anyone about Riley. Ever.

Dumbledore had simply known. The Headmaster had informed Remus. And her tutor had talked about it for her.

Even with Sean, they had never spoken of that night. Never.

And Potter had seen it. He'd done more than see it. He'd practically lived it.

She spun with an emotion she couldn't explain, something of it showing in her eyes, for Potter's own darted to hers, the haunted look spinning there vanishing instantly as he caught sight of her.

His hands immediately released her, freeing her, giving her the space she needed, as he eyed her with undisguised regret.

"Kaylens," he revealed quietly, wearily, "I won't ever do that to you. Not again."

Her eyelids scrunched up over her eyes, as she waited for a calmness to settle over her, though it was not forthcoming.

"You saw everything," she demurred, hurt lacing her whisper. "I never told anyone. You took that from me."

His swallow reverberated in the quiet air. "You can Oblivate me, if you want," he offered.

Her eyes flickered open, spying the hesitation written upon his face.

Her brow creased. "You know so much about me," she continued, looking right at him, into him. "And I know nothing about you."

He smiled sadly. "Then we'll start small," he suggested diffidently. "What's your favorite color?"

Her lips fell open into an open-mouthed gap, glossy eyes blinking as she took his light words in. "My favorite color?" she repeated.

This time a real smile creased his lips at her incredulity. "Yes," he said, nodding encouragingly. "Mine's green. Promise not to tell?"

A tiny shard of apprehension in her shattered, a ridiculous, infinitesimal laugh bubbling out of her. "How Slytherin of you."

In response he inclined an eyebrow, waiting. But behind the facade she could see the apprehension, his unease, as he waited for her reaction.

Knowing not what else to do, she allowed a cheerless smile to crease her lips, before replying, "Forest green."

He shifted, his shoulders unslouching slightly. "Why green?" he asked carefully.

Her throat clenched, an old vision of rich, full leaves gracing high tree branches filling her vision as if she were again lounging high within the boughs, Sean by her side.

The woods had always been their respite from the world. A place for the two of them to hide from worldly hurts and memories. He had taught her to climb trees as soon as her arm had recovered, her nerves functioning within reasonable realms again.

When they climbed, her world had been filled with green. Forest green.

She swallowed hard. "After what happened," she murmured, "my brother and I spent a lot of time in the woods. The forest...it can't hurt you. Not like people."

Leaning the back of her head against the wall, she relaxed. "I guess it's peaceful. The color. To me at least."

Closing her eyes she continued, "How about you?"

"My mother's eyes," his response filled with melancholy. "They were green. So I'm told."

Tilting her head back up, she looked at him curiously. "You're told?" she asked forebodingly, eyes flickering back and forth across his face searchingly.

He nodded. "I never exactly got to know either of my parents. All I have are pictures, and not many at that."

"Oh," she mouthed, recalling the werewolf's taunts in the clearing. "So that's what the Death Eater meant."

"Now do you understand why I overreacted?"

Instantly she knew what he was referring to. That day in his dormitory, barely two weeks ago, when she had been looking for a book, and her gibe had resulted in her being pressed up tightly against his nightstand, his blazingly angry eyes boring into hers.

"I'm sorry I called you a spoiled mother's boy," she said uncomfortably. "I didn't know."

His expression flickered askance. "You called me that?"

Whoops. Sheepishly she clamped down on her lower lip, glancing guiltily around.

She felt, more than saw, his eyes narrowing. "Kaylens..." He drew her name out, whilst her body tensed in the dark room. Suddenly she found herself unable to meet his eyes. Too ashamed to. She had made so many assumptions about him. So many wrong ones...

His hand touched her. She nearly jumped out of her skin. Persistently he ignored this, his hand twisting around, gently cupping her chin, forcing her face back around to his.

Still she did not look at him, and slowly, maddeningly slowly, he brought his second hand up, his fingers brushing her cheek, caressing her face as if she were delicate porcelain.

She was trembling. Gods, but she was disturbed by it.

"Potter I'm..." She trailed off, unable to articulate. She was so ashamed. All of the things she had ever said to him, yelled at him, just because he had followed her that one day, were coming back to remind her of what a hardened person she had become.

She didn't very much like that person at all.

"Kaylens," he murmured, pulling her from those shamefaced thoughts, voice sounding vaguely amused. "It's okay. I'm not going to hex you."

Warily she swiveled her gaze up to him, eyeing his shadowed form. "You aren't?"

A low laugh vibrated his throat. "Don't sound so surprised," he rebuked. "If you recall I was just as intolerable as you were. In fact, I'm pretty sure I accused you of being a Death Eater recruit on more than one occasion."

Thinking about it, a slow smile twisted her lips, "You did, didn't you?"

"Too right you are," he acceded, eyes burning with jade intensity. He was studying her, sliding his other hand away from her jaw, trailing his fingers up and along her cheekbone. Her eyes fell shut in response, her skin suddenly feeling rather warm as he cupped her face between his two hands.

"We both made assumptions," she muttered unseeingly, feeling one of his hands slipping around to the base of her skull, resting there.

Potter was quiet, only the sounds of their irregular breaths breaking the silence for a long moment.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he finally chastised. "Not all of our accusations were without basis."

"Like what?" She enjoined tremulously.

"Well for one," he narrated, "you flat out refused to talk to us, and understandably so. But, how else were we supposed to interpret your seeming support of Malfoy-esqueness?" His fingers were gently working, moving along the back of her neck. "You're insufferably stubborn, you do know that."

"Ah," she managed breathlessly, eyes shut tight. "I'm stubborn, and you're the King of Idiocy."

He glowered. "On his majesty's behalf, I resent that."

She let his indignation wash over her. "You don't expect me to bow now, do you?"

"Would be nice," he commented gravely. "It would also be nice, if you would actually look at me."

Her hazel eyes opened on pure reflex, finding him gazing at her resolutely, an intense uncertainty swimming within his retinas that she had not before seen.

He opened his mouth, as if to speak, but she cut him off.

"You're making a habit out of this."

The indecision in his eyes vanished, replaced with a questioning visage. "Out of what?" he asked hoarsely.

Breathing deeply, she stated truthfully, "Out of being around whenever I wake up from something unpleasant."

A perplexed furrow formed across his brow, the motion of his hand stalling near the base of her skull, his other gripping her shoulder tensely. "You mean like last time, when Remus..."

"Turned," she finished. "Yes. So why are you..."

"Isn't it obvious," he inquired, sounding somewhat disappointed. "I owed you. You saved my life the other night."

Genuine surprise flitted across her countenance. "If you're referring to our ridiculous counting game," she asserted, "then even I can admit that I owe you more than one. You saved mine more times than I saved yours. So why did you really stay?"

Never breaking his scrutinizing eyes from hers, he sighed with frustration. "I wanted to," he admitted grudgingly. "Don't play dumb by asking why."

Something clenched in her chest, responding to the raw emotion in his response. "Oh," she said in barely a whisper. "And here I thought you were planning on hexing me while I slept."

He blinked at her incredulously. "Hex you? Are you kidding?"

Fidgeting nervously, she managed, "Old habits die hard."

His gaze turned cutting, his fingers tapping along her spine thoughtfully. "Maybe I should Obliviate you."

"I still wouldn't mind."

"You're still a terrible liar," he countered.

"Give it time," she said in a small whisper. "I haven't had time enough to practice on you."

Even in the dark, his eyes practically glinted. "I'll give you time," he muttered lowly, applying pressure to the back of her neck and pulling her close, dropping his brow against hers.

She shivered, her breathing growing low and erratic at his touch. Remaining in silence, she waited for him to again speak.

"Question," he whispered, answering her unspoken request, his hot breath tracing along her skin, enticing the shivers rippling up her spine. "Has being honest with me ever occurred to you?"

Swallowing hard, she shook her head slightly, her skin rubbing against his. "You normally just take the answers from me, Potter," she whispered, shaken at his nearness. "So no, not really."

Immediately and too late she realized how it had sounded, for the hand weaving its way through her hair froze, his body stiffening, tensing in front of her. She felt the split moment of indecision before the warmth of his body pulled away, rattling her severely.

"Potter..." His name came out in a rushed breath, regret twisting her insides into an icy void as she felt the mattress bounce in his departure, hearing his feet meeting the wooden floorboards.

The empty spot before her suddenly seemed cold, vacuous.

Her eyes sought him out, seeing only his torso and legs through the shadows, his upper body and face having disappeared above the top bunk as he stood. "Potter I..."

"We should get you something to eat," he interrupted hollowly. "You haven't eaten in a day. You're bound to be hungry."

Fighting away the vice grip clutching her throat, she scooted to the edge of the bed, allowing her feet to dangle over the side to touch the floor. The flooring felt cold beneath her toes, and she kept her eyes carefully averted from his as she spoke.

Swallowing hard, she tried his actual name on her tongue.

"Harry, I'm sorry."

She let her words hang there, not adding or amending anything. Staring resolutely down at her feet, she silently hoped he understood.

A floorboard creaked, and she felt his calloused hands wrapping around her wrists, tugging so forcefully that she rocketed unsteadily upwards, falling against his chest, her face pressed against his shoulder.

Her legs felt wobbly, shakier than they ought, as if she were ill-accustomed to using them. His arms were tightening around her, sliding possessively around her waist, a solitary palm rising to rest along her upper back, steadying her and pressing her to him more strongly.

Even as she grasped for her bearings, the warmth of his chest starkly contrasting with the cold pressing against her bare feet, his arms were already squeezing her for a last time. Then, with careful reluctance, he was pushing her out in front of him, intent eyes boring into her own, his hardened hands flexing on her shoulders.

"It's alright," he said gruffly, eyes swimming with something raw and unspoken and thick.

She blinked up at him, lips moving wordlessly, an unpleasant, sickening sensation sweeping through her as she felt him distancing himself. The invisible door was thudding shut between them.

"Come on," he murmured, inclining his head towards the actual door. "I'm betting there is leftover breakfast downstairs worth salivating over."

Then, sliding his hands down her arms, he released her.

His scent, mingled sweat and earth, left as swiftly as he did.

A sense of unease filled her as he turned his back on her, walking towards the door with clear intent. Her gaze shot around the darkened room uneasily, and feeling rather wobbly on her bipedal legs, she followed after him.

Only as they left the room into the dimly lit hall, even its dull light seeming like the sun in comparison to the room they had just vacated,

did it occur to her that she had been seeing in the dark. Perfectly. Clearly. And she did not know why.

"Potter," she called tentatively. "Why were the lights off in there?"

Casting a look back her way, his expression softening slightly, he answered, "Unicorn blood has a way of changing more than memories. Apparently it affects your vision too. Unicorns can see in the dark, so now you can."

Her nose crinkled thoughtfully. "Then how could you see in there?"

They reached the top of the stairwell, the sound of a man shouting angrily drifting up, and even through Potter's shirt she could see his form stiffening, muscles tensing.

"Kaylens," he voiced ominously, "as soon as I figure that out, I'll tell you."

A golden loop glinted from the ebony skinned man's ear, his feet stomping around the spare room of earlier, echoing in time to his exuberant rant.

"As soon as he was informed of the situation, he insisted on returning to create damage control. Never mind the fact that if he shows up spouting off about the need for quarantining the entire city before any epidemic makes itself known that it's very probable that he'll be declared delusional as a result of the recent loss of his wife, or a terrorist accomplice!"

Tonks rubbed her temples wearily.

The man's circular assault on the floor stopped, and he whorled in place to face her, gesticulating violently.

"What in the name of wizardry were you thinking by letting him go back there, Nymphadora? And by Merlin you had better have one hell of a good answer!"

Glancing at "Casper," she watched as her normally self-controlled cousin flat out laughed at her verbal berating. The nuances of his facial expressions were blurred, courtesy of the powerful misidentification spell Dumbledore had laid on him for his own safety.

But Regulus' snickers were still audible. Apparently the man was impervious to annoyance from all but direct physical attacks on his personage, so while Kingsley's rant was wearing on her nerves, Reggie was having quite a grand time considering that he wasn't the one it was directed at.

"WELL!?" Kingsley roared impatiently.

Twisting her arms into a chicken wing movement, so as to rub the area where the base of her skull met her spinal column, she began rubbing the pressure points there tiredly in hopes of preventing the oncoming migraine.

"I was thinking," she replied steadily, reminding herself that Kingsley was her superior at work, "that Kenneth Bothan is not only an adult, but the head of an entire country that is about to be besieged by a very serious plague. Short of stunning him there really wasn't a lot I could do to prevent him from heading back to begin damage control, and I couldn't go with him without bringing Emily too so..."

And it was true. Dumbledore had even warily concurred with his decision to head back, though some magical charms had been placed upon the Irish President as a precaution, and one of Dublin's Aurors, who was also an Order member, had been arranged to replace Tonks as his guard.

A vein throbbed in Kingsley's forehead.

"I'm still watching, Emily," Tonks pointed out helpfully. "And Spruner is watching Kenneth in Dublin. So see? They're both taken care of."

A slew of unintelligible words flew her way, and she swore to God that Kingsley's face actually turned red.

Red.

Cocking her head to the side, her mouth opened before it could stop itself.

"Are you sure you're not a Metamorphmagus, Kingsley? Because you just changed the entire color of your face."

A paper weight was hurled her way, shattering just to the left of her, as Kingsley began another melodramatic rant about insubordination and how the entire Auror department was doomed.

Of course, some of Kingsley's anger was justified. It was a fact she had to begrudgingly admit, because she had been placed in charge of protecting the Bothan family by not the Order, though they had desired it as well, but by the Ministry.

So naturally when she had created an illegal portkey to whisk the man back to what would soon be a quarantined zone with a high death toll, Kingsley had been less than thrilled, even with Dumbledore's cautious blessing.

Regulus "Caspar" Black lounged further back in his armchair, mock clapping at the show. Kingsley kicked something. Emily opened the door to the room, smiling her missing toothed smile, her face covered in green goop from a misguided, self-played game of exploding snap.

Then the auburn haired eight year old threw a very worried look Kingsley's way, informing him very seriously that he was acting like a child, and that tempter tantrums were bad form.

Tonks shoved a fist in her mouth as the pencil Kingsley had picked up snapped right in half.

Regulus seized the opportunity to throw out a warning.

"You better run kid," he called merrily. "Or place a bet. I'm thinking ole Shackbolt here will die of cardiac arrest before he starts throwing curses. How about you?"

Emily's wide, disapproving brown eyes looked back and forth between them, before a large gob of green gunk fell, landing with a loud splat on her shoe.

Shaking her head Emily slunk out the door, mumbling about immature babysitters.

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